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THE STRANGE RIDE OF MORROWBIE JUKES:

Rudyard Kipling

THE FACELESS THING: Edward D. Hoch

THE RED ROOM: H. G. Wells

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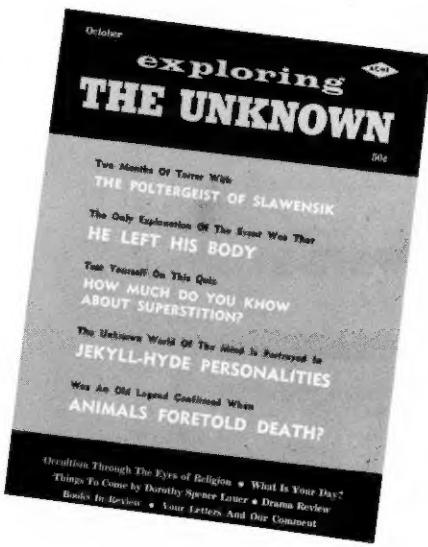
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Volume 1

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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Introduction

The conversation between the characters "Howard" and "Frank" in our opening story, "The Space-Eaters", wherein Howard delivers his opinion of the classic masters of the eerie and weird tale could very well be a paraphrase of actual conversations between Howard P. Lovecraft and Frank Belknap Long. For the evaluations are very much in line with Lovecraft's often-expressed feelings about the horror story, its limitations in the hands of earlier writers, and its unplumbed possibilities.

Lovecraft envisioned horror and strangeness on a cosmic scale, as encounters between humanity and phenomena which amounted to dislocations of time, space, and matter as we know it. He felt very deeply that we human beings are to a great extent protected within the confines of very limited and special conditions in the continuum, and what we think of as "natural law" is by no means universal, outside the small area in which we live. True horror, for him, then, was encounter with reality beyond these limitations; and while, in his stories, many of the beings encountered can be considered as malignant, consciously and deliberately hurtful to human beings, he did not feel that this was at all necessary in fact. Just being plunged into the real, beyond our safeguarding illusions, he thought, would be sufficient to destroy anyone, as surely as if something out there intended such destruction.

After reading his stories for many years, I wrote to him, finally, toward the end of 1936, protesting the fact that, in his stories, his lead characters are consistently frozen with fear, driven mad with terror, destroyed by encounters with the unknown. Must this necessarily be the case? He thought that it must; and his aim, he said was to concentrate upon the phenomena and the strange beings. He made no effort to create human characters, he said, as he considered them as secondary,

necessary foils for presenting his cosmic visions; and he thought that the highest possible sort of weird or horror story was one which dealt primarily with phenomena, not with people and their development. As a result, all of his people were little more than stereotypes; he knew this and did it deliberately.

There is no doubt that Lovecraft wrote some very effective stories using this approach, but the method does, after all, have its defects. Essentially, all the plots will be the same, and when you have read enough examples of this sort of story it cannot hold any more surprises for you. And when a group of pupils, or imitators spring up, as happened in the case of Lovecraft, both the strengths and the weaknesses of the master will be repeated — generally, a watering down of the strengths and a careful adherence to the weaknesses. Mr. Long, however, was not an imitator; he brought his own distinct personality into his earliest stories, of which "The Space-Eaters" is one, and while this is certainly a "Lovecraftian" type story, it is by no means a muddy carbon copy.

The bane of any sort of specialized magazine is sameness — and this is something which has been the death of many promising ventures in magazines of imaginative fiction. Readers of this sort of literature are much more likely to write letters to the editor regularly than are readers of western, detective, sports, or romantic fiction — to name just a few other specialized fields — and it is difficult, at times, for an editor not to fall into the trap of assuming that the vocal minority is fully representative of all. The vocal minority is valuable, make no mistake about that. But, as time goes on, the "regulars" become more and more sophisticated; they have come to desire just a few limited types of stories — or they have become over-familiar with many types and do not want to see them any more. The result is that a magazine is likely to become more and more of an in-group affair; the stories will begin to read as if most of the authors have been reading over each others' shoulders. And this results in more and more references piling up — references which, for the new reader, have no referent.

A good example of what we mean by the above is the "forbidden evil book". Lovecraft invented a dread volume called the **Necronomicon** of Abdul Alhazred. He employed it in such a manner that, at first, it did evoke a feeling of horror. But as time went on, it became something like a labor-saving device,

particularly for disciples. To evoke a feeling of horror in the reader, one mentioned *Necronomicon*. Perhaps it worked for those readers who had read the earlier stories; but more and more it became a sort of shorthand which was increasingly meaningless and irritating to the person who was not "in". And more and more writers of weird fiction began to add to the canon, until we have a sizeable list of dread, horrible volumes each of which was supposed to push the horror button when mentioned. Eventually it becomes as meaningless as trying to expect not only a non-Catholic, but a person who has no clear idea what Catholicism is, to be horrified at a mention of the Black Mass — that is, **spiritually** horrified. Murder and torture are horrifying no matter what rituals and ceremonies may accompany them.

Your letters have shown appreciation of our efforts to bring you **variety**. This means, necessarily, that there will be some story or stories in each issue that any particular reader does not consider horrible, gruesome, weird, strange, etc. at all — but the interesting thing is that where a dozen letters may declare that the reader didn't find story "X" as within our orbit, "X" may equal a dozen different stories!

The reader who likes every story in an issue will have his counterpart in the reader who didn't like any story in the issue. Ideally, we'd love to see several hundred thousand readers in the first division. But looking at it realistically, what we're really aiming for is readers who will consistently find sufficient material in each issue that they enjoyed heartily so that they can tolerate the items which did not please them so much. Meanwhile, your letters have been helpful and we hope you'll continue writing to us — particularly, if, despite our intentions, an atmosphere of sameness or the feeling of over-specialization begins to creep in.

Robert A. W. Lowndes

The Space-Eaters

by Frank Belknap Long

Several of the friends and pupils of the late H. P. Lovecraft tried their hands at the "Lovecraftian" type of horror story, and to show their affection for the old master, made him a character — often the central character — in the tale. The first story of this nature, and in many ways the best we believe, is "The Space-Eaters." It is as not as slavish an imitation of HPL as some of the others and maintains an individuality that they did not. It first appeared in 1928, and was reprinted in the author's collection of short stories, "The Hounds Of Tindalos," published by Arkham House and now out of print. As with "The Man With A Thousand Legs," which we presented last issue, the author has taken advantage of the opportunity to delete a few "dated" aspects of the story, and make other revisions — none of which detract from its impact.

THE HORROR CAME to Partridgeville in a blind fog.

All that afternoon thick vapors from the sea had swirled and eddied about the farm, and the room in which we sat swam with moisture. The fog ascended in spirals from beneath the door, and its long, moist fingers caressed my hair until

it dripped. The square-paned windows were coated with a thick, dewlike moisture; the air was heavy and dank and unbelievably cold.

I stared gloomily at my friend. He had turned his back to the window and was writing furiously. He was a tall, slim man with a slight stoop and ab-

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normally broad shoulders. In profile his face was impressive. He had an extremely broad forehead, long nose and slightly protuberant chin — a strong, sensitive face which suggested a wildly imaginative nature held in restraint by a skeptical and truly extraordinary intellect.

My friend wrote short-stories. He wrote to please himself, in defiance of contemporary taste, and his tales were unusual. They would have delighted Poe; they would have delighted Hawthorne, or Ambrose Bierce, or Villiers de l'Isle Adam. They were studies of abnormal men, abnormal beasts, abnormal plants. He wrote of remote realms of imagination and horror, and the colors, sounds and odors which he dared to evoke were never seen, heard or smelt on the familiar side of the moon. He projected his creations against mind-chilling backgrounds. They stalked through tall and lonely forests, over ragged mountains, and slithered down the stairs of ancient houses, and between the piles of rotting black wharves.

One of his tales, *The House of the Worm*, had induced a young student at a Midwestern University to seek refuge in an enormous red-brick building where everyone approved of his sitting on the floor and shouting at the top of his voice: "Lo, my beloved is fairer than all the

lilies among the lilies in the lily garden." Another, *The Defilers*, had brought him precisely one hundred and ten letters of indignation from local readers when it appeared in the *Partidgeville Gazette*.

As I continued to stare at him he suddenly stopped writing and shook his head. "I can't do it," he said. "I should have to invent a new language. And yet I can comprehend the thing emotionally, intuitively, if you will. If I could only convey it in a sentence somehow — the strange crawling of its fleshless spirit!"

"Is it some new horror?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It is not new to me. I have known and felt it for years — a horror utterly beyond anything your prosaic brain can conceive."

"Thank you," I said.

"All human brains are prosaic," he elaborated. "I meant no offense. It is the shadowy terrors that lurk behind and above them that are mysterious and awful. Our little brains — what can they know of vampire-like entities which may lurk in dimensions higher than our own, or beyond the universe of stars? I think sometimes they lodge in our heads, and our brains feel them, but when they stretch out tentacles to probe and explore us, we go screaming mad." He was staring at me steadily now.

"But you can't honestly believe in such nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"Of course not!" He shook his head and laughed. "You know damn well I'm too profoundly skeptical to believe in anything. I have merely outlined a poet's reactions to the universe. If a man wishes to write ghostly stories and actually convey a sensation of horror, he must believe in everything — and *anything*. By *anything* I mean the horror that transcends *everything*, that is more terrible and impossible than *everything*. He must believe that there are things from outer space that can reach down and fasten themselves on us with a malevolence that can destroy us utterly — our bodies as well as our minds."

"But this thing from outer space — how can he describe it if he doesn't know its shape — or size or color?"

"It is virtually impossible to describe it. That is what I have sought to do — and failed. Perhaps some day — but then, I doubt if it can ever be accomplished. But your artist can hint, suggest . . ."

"Suggest what?" I asked, little puzzled.

"Suggest a horror that is utterly unearthly; that makes itself felt in terms that have no counterparts on Earth."

I WAS STILL puzzled. He

smiled wearily and elaborated his theory.

"There is something prosaic," he said, "about even the best of the classic tales of mystery and terror. Old Mrs. Radcliffe, with her hidden vaults and bleeding ghosts; Maturin, with his allegorical, Faustlike hero-villains, and his fiery flames from the mouth of hell; Edgar Poe, with his blood-clotted corpses, and black cats, his telltale hearts and disintegrating Valdemars; Hawthorne, with his amusing preoccupation with the problems and horrors arising from mere human sin (as though human sins were of any significance to a coldly malign intelligence from beyond the stars). Then we have modern masters — Algernon Blackwood, who invites us to a feast of the high gods and shows us an old woman with a harelip sitting before a ouija board fingering soiled cards, or an absurd nimbus of ectoplasm emanating from some clairvoyant ninny; Bram Stoker with his vampires and werewolves, mere conventional myths, the tag-ends of medieval folklore; Wells with his pseudo-scientific bogies, fishermen at the bottom of the sea, ladies in the moon, and the hundred and one idiots who are constantly writing ghost stories for the magazines — what have they contributed to the literature of the unholy?"

"Are we not made of flesh

and blood? It is but natural that we should be revolted and horrified when we are shown that flesh and blood in a state of corruption and decay, with the worms passing over and under it. It is but natural that a story about a corpse should thrill us, fill us with fear and horror and loathing. Any fool can awake these emotions in us — Poe really accomplished very little with his *Lady Ushers*, and *liquescent Valdemars*. He appealed to simple, natural, understandable emotions, and it was inevitable that his readers should respond.

"Are we not the descendants of barbarians? Did we not once dwell in tall and sinister forests, at the mercy of beasts that rend and tear? It is but inevitable that we should shiver and cringe when we meet in literature dark shadows from our own past. Harpies and vampires and werewolves — what are they but magnifications, distortions of the great birds and bats and ferocious dogs that harassed and tortured our ancestors? It is easy enough to arouse fear by such means. It is easy enough to frighten men with the flames at the mouth of hell, because they are hot and shrivel and burn the flesh — and who does not understand and dread a fire? Blows that kill, fires that burn, shadows that horrify because their substances lurk evilly in the black corridors

of our inherited memories — I am weary of the writers who would terrify us by such pathetically obvious and trite unpleasantry."

Real indignation blazed in his eyes.

"Suppose there were a greater horror? Suppose evil things from some other universe should decide to invade this one? Suppose we couldn't see them? Suppose we couldn't feel them? Suppose they were of a color unknown on Earth, or rather, of an *appearance* that was without color?

"Suppose they had a shape unknown on Earth? Suppose they were four-dimensional, five-dimensional, six-dimensional? Suppose they were a hundred-dimensional? Suppose they had no dimensions at all and yet existed? What could we do?

"They would not exist for us? They would exist for us if they gave us pain. Suppose it was not the pain of heat or cold or any of the pains we know, but a new pain? Suppose they touched something besides our nerves — reached our brains in a new and terrible way? Suppose they made themselves felt in a new and strange and unspeakable way? What could we do? Our hands would be tied. You can not oppose what you can not see or feel. You can not oppose the thousand-dimensional. *Suppose they should eat*

their way to us through space!"

HE WAS SPEAKING now with an intensity of emotion which belied his avowed skepticism of a moment before.

"That is what I have tried to write about. I wanted to make my readers feel and see that thing from another universe, from beyond space. I could easily enough hint at it or suggest it — any fool can do that — but I wanted actually to describe it. To describe a color that is not a color! a form that is formless!

"A mathematician could perhaps slightly more than suggest it. There would be strange curves and angles that an inspired mathematician in a wild frenzy of calculation might glimpse vaguely. It is absurd to say that mathematicians have not discovered the fourth dimension. They have often glimpsed it, often approached it, often apprehended it, but they are unable to demonstrate it. I know a mathematician who swears that he once saw the sixth dimension in a wild flight into the sublime skies of the differential calculus.

"Unfortunately I am not a mathematician. I am only a poor fool of a creative artist, and the thing from outer space utterly eludes me."

SOMEONE WAS pounding loudly on the door. I crossed

the room and drew back the latch. "What do you want?" I asked. "What is the matter?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Frank," said a familiar voice, "but I've got to talk to someone."

I recognized the lean, white face of my nearest neighbor, and stepped instantly to one side. "Come in," I said. "Come in, by all means. Howard and I have been discussing ghosts, and the things we've conjured up aren't pleasant company. Perhaps you can argue them away."

I called Howard's horrors ghosts because I didn't want to shock my commonplace neighbor. Henry Wells was immensely big and tall, and as he strode into the room he seemed to bring a part of the night with him.

He collapsed on a sofa and surveyed us with frightened eyes. Howard laid down the story he had been reading, removed and wiped his glasses, and frowned. He was more or less tolerant of my bucolic visitors. We waited for perhaps a minute, and then the three of us spoke almost simultaneously. "A horrible night!" "Beastly, isn't it?" "Wretched."

Henry Wells frowned. "Tonight," he said. "I — I met with a funny accident. I was driving Hortense through Mulligan Wood . . ."

"Hortense?" Howard interrupted.

"His horse," I explained impatiently. "You were returning from Brewster, weren't you, Harry?"

"From Brewster, yes," he replied. "I was driving between the trees, keeping a sharp lookout for cars with their lights on too bright, coming right at me out of the murk, and listening to the foghorns in the bay wheezing and moaning, when something wet landed on my head. 'Rain,' I thought. 'I hope the supplies keep dry.'

"I turned round to make sure that the butter and flour were covered up, and something soft like a sponge rose up from the bottom of the wagon and hit me in the face. I snatched at it and caught it between my fingers.

"In my hands it felt like jelly. I squeezed it, and moisture ran out of it down my wrists. It wasn't so dark that I couldn't see it, either. Funny how you can see in fogs — they seem to make night lighter. There was a sort of brightness in the air. I dunno, maybe it wasn't the fog, either. The trees seemed to stand out. You could see them sharp and clear. As I was saying, I looked at the thing, and what do you think it looked like? Like a piece of raw liver. Or like a calf's brain. Now that I come to think of it, it was more like a calf's brain. There were grooves in it, and you don't find many grooves in liv-

er. Liver's usually as smooth as glass.

"It was an awful moment for me. 'There's someone up in one of those trees,' I thought. 'He's some tramp or crazy man or fool and he's been eating liver. My wagon frightened him and he dropped it — a piece of it. I can't be wrong. There was no liver in my wagon when I left Brewster.'

"I looked up. You know how tall all of the trees are in Mulligan Wood. You can't see the tops of some of them from the wagon-road on a clear day. And you know how crooked and queer-looking some of the trees are.

"It's funny, but I've always thought of them as old men — tall old men, you understand, tall and crooked and very evil. I've always thought of them as wanting to work mischief. There's something unwholesome about trees that grow very close together and grow crooked.

"I looked up.

"At first I didn't see anything but the tall trees, all white and glistening with the fog, and above them a thick, white mist that hid the stars. And then something long and white ran quickly down the trunk of one of the trees.

"It ran so quickly down the tree that I couldn't see it clearly. And it was so thin anyway that there wasn't much to see.

But it was like an arm. It was like a long, white and very thin arm. But of course it wasn't an arm. Who ever heard of an arm as tall as a tree? I don't know what made me compare it to an arm, because it was really nothing but a thin line — like a wire, a string. I'm not sure that I saw it at all. Maybe I imagined it. I'm not even sure that it was as wide as a string. But it had a hand. Or didn't it? When I think of it my brain gets dizzy. You see, it moved so quickly I couldn't see it clearly at all.

"But it gave me the impression that it was looking for something that it had dropped. For a minute the hand seemed to spread out over the road, and then it left the tree and came toward the wagon. It was like a huge white hand walking on its fingers with a terribly long arm fastened to it that went up and up until it touched the fog, or perhaps until it touched the stars.

"I screamed and slashed Hontense with the reins, but the horse didn't need any urging. She was up and off before I could throw the liver, or calf's brain, or whatever it was, into the road. She raced so fast she almost upset the wagon, but I didn't draw in the reins. I'd rather lie in a ditch with a broken rib than have a long, white hand squeezing the breath out of my throat.

"We had almost cleared the wood and I was just beginning to breathe again when my brain went cold. I can't describe what happened in any other way. My brain got as cold as ice inside my head. I can tell you I was frightened.

"Don't imagine I couldn't think clearly. I was conscious of everything that was going on about me, but my brain was so cold I screamed with the pain. Have you ever held a piece of ice in the palm of your hand for as long as two or three minutes? It burnt, didn't it? Ice burns worse than fire. Well, my brain felt as though it had lain on ice for hours and hours. There was a furnace inside my head, but it was a cold furnace. It was roaring with raging cold.

"Perhaps I should have been thankful that the pain didn't last. It wore off in about ten minutes, and when I got home I didn't think I was any the worse for my experience. I'm sure I didn't think I was any the worse until I looked at myself in the glass. Then I saw the hole in my head."

HENRY WELLS leaned forward and brushed back the hair from his right temple.

"Here is the wound," he said. "What do you make of it?" He tapped with his fingers beneath a small round opening in the side of his head. "It's like a bullet-wound," he elaborated, "but

there was no blood and you can look in pretty far. It seems to go right in to the center of my head. I shouldn't be alive."

Howard had risen and was staring at my neighbor with angry and accusing eyes.

"Why have you lied to us?" he shouted. "Why have you told us this absurd story? A long hand! You were drunk, man. Drunk — and yet you've succeeded in doing what I'd have sweated blood to accomplish. If I could have made my readers feel that horror, know it for a moment, that horror that you described in the woods, I should be with the immortals — I should be greater than Poe, greater than Hawthorne. And you — a clumsy drunken liar . . ."

I was on my feet with a furious protest.

"He's not lying," I said. "He's been shot — someone has shot him in the head. Look at this wound. My God, man, you have no call to insult him!"

Howard's wrath died and the fire went out of his eyes. "Forgive me," he said. "You can't imagine how badly I've wanted to capture that ultimate horror, to put it on paper, and he did it so easily. If he had warned me that he was going to describe something like that I would have taken notes. But of course he doesn't know he's an artist. It was an accidental *tour de force* that he accomplished;

he couldn't do it again, I'm sure I'm sorry I went up in the air — I apologize. Do you want me to go for a doctor? That is a bad wound."

My neighbor shook his head. "I don't want a doctor," he said. "I've seen a doctor. There's no bullet in my head — that hole was not made by a bullet. When the doctor couldn't explain it I laughed at him. I hate doctors; and I haven't much use for fools that think I'm in the habit of lying. I haven't much use for people who won't believe me when I tell 'em I saw the long, white thing come sliding down the tree as clear as day."

But Howard was examining the wound in defiance of my neighbor's indignation. "It was made by something round and sharp," he said. "It's curious, but the flesh isn't torn. A knife or bullet would have torn the flesh, left a ragged edge."

I nodded, and was bending to study the wound when Wells shrieked, and clapped his hands to his head. "Ah-h-h!" he choked. "It's come back — the terrible, terrible cold."

Howard stared. "Don't expect me to believe such nonsense!" he exclaimed disgustedly.

But Wells was holding on to his head and dancing about the room in a delirium of agony. "I can't stand it!" he shrieked. "It's freezing up my brain. It's not like ordinary cold. It isn't. Oh

God! It's like nothing you've ever felt. It bites, it scorches, it tears. It's like acid."

I laid my hand upon his shoulder and tried to quiet him, but he pushed me aside and made for the door.

"I've got to get out of here," he screamed. "The thing wants room. My head won't hold it. It wants the night — the vast night. It wants to wallow in the night."

He threw back the door and disappeared into the fog. Howard wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat and collapsed into a chair.

"Mad," he muttered. "A tragic case of manic-depressive psychosis. Who would have suspected it? The story he told us wasn't conscious art at all. It was simply a nightmare-fungus conceived by the brain of a lunatic."

"Yes," I said, "but how do you account for the hole in his head?"

"Oh, that!" Howard shrugged. "He probably always had it — probably was born with it."

"Nonsense," I said. "The man never had a hole in his head before. Personally, I think he's been shot. Something ought to be done. He needs medical attention. I think I'll phone Dr. Smith."

"It is useless to interfere," said Howard. "That hole was not made by a bullet. I advise you to forget him until tomor-

row. His insanity may be temporary; it may wear off; and then he'd blame us for interfering. If he's still emotionally disturbed tomorrow, if he comes here again and tries to make trouble, you can notify the proper authorities. Has he ever acted queerly before?"

"No," I said. "He was always quite sane. I think I'll take your advice and wait. But I wish I could explain the hole in his head."

"The story he told interests me more," said Howard. "I'm going to write it out before I forget it. Of course I shan't be able to make the horror as real as he did, but perhaps I can catch a bit of the strangeness and glamor."

He unscrewed his fountain pen and began to cover a sheet of paper with curious phrases.

I shivered and closed the door.

FOR SEVERAL minutes there was no sound in the room save the scratching of his pen as it moved across the paper. For several minutes there was silence — and then the shrieks commenced. Or were they wails?

We heard them through the closed door, heard them above the moaning of the foghorns and the wash of the waves on Mulligan's Beach. We heard them above the million sounds of night that had horrified and

depressed us as we sat and talked in that fog-enshrouded and lonely house. We heard them so clearly that for a moment we thought they came from just outside the house. It was not until they came again and again — long, piercing wails — that we discovered in them a quality of remoteness. Slowly we became aware that the wails came from far away, as far away, perhaps, as Mulligan Wood.

"A soul in torture," muttered Howard. "A poor, damned soul in the grip of the horror I've been telling you about — the horror I've known and felt for years."

He rose unsteadily to his feet. His eyes were shining and he was breathing heavily.

I seized his shoulders and shook him. "You shouldn't project yourself into your stories that way," I exclaimed. "Some poor chap is in distress. I don't know what's happened. Perhaps a ship foundered. I'm going to put on a slicker and find out what it's all about. I have an idea we may be needed."

"We *may* be needed," repeated Howard slowly. "We may be needed indeed. It will not be satisfied with a single victim. Think of that great journey through space, the thirst and dreadful hungers it must have known! It is preposterous to imagine that it will be content with a single victim!"

Then, suddenly, a change came over him. The light went out of his eyes and his voice lost its quaver. He shivered.

"Forgive me," he said. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm as mad as the yokel who was here a few minutes ago. But I can't help identifying myself with my characters when I write. I'd described something very evil, and those yells — well, they are exactly like the yells a man would make if — if . . ."

"I understand," I interrupted, "but we've no time to discuss that now. There's a poor chap out there" — I pointed vaguely toward the door — "with his back against the wall. He's fighting off something — I don't know what. We've got to help him."

"Of course, of course," he agreed, and followed me into the kitchen.

Without a word I took down a slicker and handed it to him. I also handed him an enormous rubber hat.

"Get into these as quickly as you can," I said. "The chap's desperately in need of us."

I had gotten my own slicker down from the rack and was forcing my arms through its sticky sleeves. In a moment we were both pushing our way through the fog.

The fog was like a living thing. Its long fingers reached up and slapped us relentlessly on the face. It curled about our

bodies and ascended in great, grayish spirals from the tops of our heads. It retreated before us, and as suddenly closed in and enveloped us.

Dimly ahead of us we saw the lights of a few lonely farms. Behind us the sea drummed, and the foghorns sent out a continuous, mournful ululation. The collar of Howard's slicker was turned up over his ears, and from his long nose moisture dripped. There was grim decision in his eyes, and his jaw was set.

FOR MANY minutes we plodded on in silence, and it was not until we approached Mulligan Wood that he spoke.

"If necessary," he said, "we shall enter the wood."

I nodded. "There is no reason why we should not enter the wood," I said. "It isn't a large wood."

"One could get out quickly?"

"One could get out very quickly indeed. My God, did you hear that?"

The shrieks had grown horribly loud.

"He is suffering," said Howard. "He is suffering terribly. Do you suppose — do you suppose it's your crazy friend?"

He had voiced a question which I had been asking myself for some time.

"It's conceivable," I said. "But we'll have to interfere if he's as mad as that. I wish I'd

brought some of the neighbors with me."

"Why in heaven's name didn't you?" Howard shouted. "It may take a dozen men to handle him." He was staring at the tall trees that towered before us, and I didn't think he really gave Henry Wells so much as a thought.

"That's Mulligan Wood," I said. I swallowed to keep my mouth. "It isn't a big wood," I added idiotically.

"Oh my God!" Out of the fog there came the sound of a voice in the last extremity of pain. "They're eating up my brain. Oh my God!"

I was at that moment in deadly fear that I might become as mad as the man in the woods. I clutched Howard's arm.

"Let's go back," I shouted. "Let's go back at once. We were fools to come. There is nothing here but madness and suffering and perhaps death."

"That may be," said Howard, "but we're going on."

His face was ashen beneath his dripping hat, and his eyes were thin blue slits.

"Very well," I said grimly. "We'll go on."

Slowly we moved among the trees. They towered above us, and the thick fog so distorted them and merged them together that they seemed to move forward with us. From their twisted branches the fog hung

in ribbons. Ribbons, did I say? Rather were they snakes of fog — writhing snakes with venomous tongues and leering eyes. Through swirling clouds of fog we saw the scaly, gnarled boles of the trees, and every bole resembled the twisted body of an evil old man. Only the small oblong of light cast by my electric torch protected us against their malevolence.

Through great banks of fog we moved, and every moment the screams grew louder. Soon we were catching fragments of sentences, hysterical shoutings that merged into prolonged wails. "Colder and colder and colder . . . they are eating up my brain. Colder! Ah-h-h!"

Howard gripped my arm. "We'll find him," he said. "We can't turn back now."

When we found him he was lying on his side. His hands were clasped about his head, and his body was bent double, the knees drawn up so tightly that they almost touched his chest. He was silent. We bent and shook him, but he made no sound.

"Is he dead?" I choked out. I wanted desperately to turn and run. The trees were very close to us.

"I don't know," said Howard. "I don't know. I hope that he is dead."

I saw him kneel and slide his hand under the poor devil's shirt. For a moment his face

was a mask. Then he got up quickly and shook his head.

"He is alive," he said. "We must get him into some dry clothes as quickly as possible."

I helped him. Together we lifted the bent figure from the ground and carried it forward between the trees. Twice we stumbled and nearly fell, and the creepers tore at our clothes. The creepers were little malicious hands grasping and tearing under the malevolent guidance of the great trees. Without a star to guide us, without a light except the little pocket lamp which was growing dim, we fought our way out of Mulligan Wood.

THE DRONING did not commence until we had left the wood. At first we scarcely heard it, it was so low, like the purring of gigantic engines far down in the earth. But slowly, as we stumbled forward with our burden, it grew so loud that we could not ignore it."

"What is that?" muttered Howard, and through the wraiths of fog I saw that his face had a greenish tinge.

"I don't know," I mumbled. "It's something horrible. I never heard anything like it. Can't you walk faster?"

So far we had been fighting familiar horrors, but the droning and humming that rose behind us was like nothing that I had ever heard on Earth. In ex-

cruciating fright, I shrieked aloud. "Faster, Howard, faster! For God's sake, let's get out of this!"

As I spoke, the body that we were carrying squirmed, and from its cracked lips issued a torrent of gibberish: "I was walking between the trees looking up. I couldn't see their tops. I was looking up, and then suddenly I looked down and the thing landed on my shoulders. It was all legs — all long, crawling legs. It went right into my head. I wanted to get away from the trees, but I couldn't. I was alone in the forest with the thing on my back, in my head, and when I tried to run, the trees reached out and tripped me. It made a hole so it could get in. It's my brain it wants. Today it made a hole, and now it's crawled in and it's sucking and sucking and sucking. It's as cold as ice and it makes a noise like a great big fly. But it isn't a fly. And it isn't a hand. I was wrong when I called it a hand. You can't see it. I wouldn't have seen or felt it if it hadn't made a hole and got in. You almost see it, you almost feel it, and that means that it's getting ready to go in."

"Can you walk, Wells? Can you walk?"

Howard had dropped Wells' legs and I could hear the harsh intake of his breath as he struggled to rid himself of his slicker.

"I think so," Wells sobbed.

"But it doesn't matter. It's got me now. Put me down and save yourselves."

"We've got to run!" I yelled.

"It's our one chance," cried Howard. "Wells, you follow us. Follow us, do you understand? They'll burn up your brain if they catch you. We're going to run, lad. Follow us!"

He was off through the fog. Wells shook himself free, and followed like a man in a trance. I felt a horror more terrible than death. The noise was dreadfully loud; it was right in my ears, and yet for a moment I couldn't move. The wall of fog was growing thicker.

"Frank will be lost!" It was the voice of Wells, raised in a despairing shout.

"We'll go back!" It was Howard shouting now. "It's death, or worse, but we can't leave him."

"Keep on," I called out. "They won't get me. Save yourselves!"

In my anxiety to prevent them from sacrificing themselves I plunged wildly forward. In a moment I had joined Howard and was clutching at his arm.

"What is it?" I cried. "What have we to fear?"

THE DRONING WAS all about us now, but no louder.

"Come quickly or we'll be lost!" he urged frantically. "They've broken down all bar-

riers. That buzzing is a warning. We're sensitives — we've been warned, but if it gets louder we're lost. They're strong near Mulligan Wood, and it's here they've made themselves felt. They're experimenting now — feeling their way. Later, when they've learned, they'll spread out. If we can only reach the farm . . ."

"We'll reach the farm!" I shouted as I clawed my way through the fog.

"Heaven help us if we don't!" moaned Howard.

He had thrown off his slicker, and his seeping wet shirt clung tragically to his lean body. He moved through the blackness with long, furious strides. Far ahead we heard the shrieks of Henry Wells. Ceaselessly the foghorns moaned; ceaselessly the fog swirled and eddied about us.

And the droning continued. It seemed incredible that we should ever have found a way to the farm in the blackness. But find the farm we did, and into it we stumbled with glad cries.

"Shut the door!" shouted Howard.

I shut the door.

"We are safe here, I think," he said. "They haven't reached the farm yet."

"What has happened to Wells?" I gasped, and then I saw the wet tracks leading into the kitchen.

Howard saw them too. His eyes flashed with momentary relief.

"I'm glad he's safe," he muttered. "I feared for him."

Then his face darkened. The kitchen was unlighted and no sound came from it.

Without a word Howard walked across the room and into the darkness beyond. I sank into a chair, flicked the moisture from my eyes and brushed back my hair, which had fallen in soggy strands across my face. For a moment I sat, breathing heavily, and when the door creaked, I shivered. But I remembered Howard's assurance: "They haven't reached the farm yet. We're safe here."

Somehow, I had confidence in Howard. He realized that we were threatened by a new and unknown horror, and in some occult way he had grasped its limitations.

I confess, though, that when I heard the screams that came from the kitchen, my faith in my friend was slightly shaken. There were low growls, such as I could not believe came from any human throat, and the voice of Howard raised in wild expostulation. "Let go, I say! Are you quite mad? Man, man, we have saved you! Don't, I say — let go of my leg. Ah-hh!"

As Howard staggered into the room I sprang forward and caught him in my arms. He was covered with blood from head

to foot and his face was ashen.

"He's gone raving mad," he moaned. "He was running about on his hands and knees like a dog. He sprang at me, and almost killed me. I fought him off, but I'm badly bitten. I hit him in the face — knocked him unconscious. I may have killed him. He's an animal — I had to protect myself."

I laid Howard on the sofa and knelt beside him, but he scorned my aid.

Don't bother with me!" he commanded. "Get a rope, quickly, and tie him up. If he comes to, we'll have to fight for our lives."

WHAT FOLLOWED was a nightmare. I remember vaguely that I went into the kitchen with a rope and tied poor Wells to a chair; then I bathed and dressed Howard's wounds, and lit a fire in the grate. I remember also that I telephoned for a doctor. But the incidents are confused in my memory, and I have no clear recollection of anything until the arrival of a tall, grave man with kindly and sympathetic eyes and a presence that was as soothing as an opiate.

He examined Howard, nodded, and explained that the wounds were not serious. He examined Wells, and did not nod. He explained slowly that

"His pupils don't respond to

light," he said. "An immediate operation will be necessary. I tell you frankly, I don't think we can save him."

"That wound in his head, Doctor," I said. "Was it made by a bullet?"

The doctor frowned. "It puzzles me," he said. "Of course it was made by a bullet, but it should have partially closed up. It goes right into the brain. You say you know nothing about it. I believe you, but I think the authorities should be notified at once. Someone will be wanted for manslaughter, unless" — he paused — "unless the wound was self-inflicted. What you tell me is curious. That he should have been able to walk about for hours seems incredible. The wound has obviously been dressed, too. There is no clotted blood at all."

He paced slowly back and forth. "We must operate here — at once. There is a slight chance. Luckily, I brought some instruments. We must clear this table and — do you think you could hold a lamp for me?"

I nodded. "I'll try," I said.

"Good!"

The doctor busied himself with preparations while I debated whether or not I should phone for the police.

"I'm convinced," I said at last, "that the wound was self-inflicted. Wells acted very

strangely. If you are willing, Doctor . . .”

“Yes?”

“We will remain silent about this matter until after the operation. If Wells lives, there would be no need of involving the poor chap in a police investigation.”

The doctor nodded. “Very well,” he said. “We will operate first and decide afterward.”

Howard was laughing silently from his couch. “The police,” he snickered. “Of what use would they be against the things in Mulligan Wood?”

There was an ironic and ominous quality about his mirth, that disturbed me. The horrors that we had known in the fog seemed absurd and impossible in the cool, scientific presence of Dr. Smith, and I didn’t want to be reminded of them.

THE DOCTOR turned from his instruments and whispered into my ear. “Your friend has a slight fever, and apparently it has made him delirious. If you will bring me a glass of water I will mix him a sedative.”

I raced to secure a glass, and in a moment we had Howard sleeping soundly.

“Now then,” said the doctor as he handed me the lamp. “You must hold this steady and move it about as I direct.”

The white, unconscious form of Henry Wells lay upon the table that the doctor and I had

cleared, and I trembled all over when I thought of what lay before me.

I should be obliged to stand and gaze into the living brain of my poor friend as the doctor relentlessly laid it bare.

With swift, experienced fingers the doctor administered an anesthetic. I was oppressed by a dreadful feeling that we were committing a crime, that Henry Wells would have violently disapproved, that he would have preferred to die. It is a dreadful thing to mutilate a man’s brain. And yet I knew that the doctor’s conduct was above reproach, and that the ethics of his profession demanded that he operate.

“We are ready,” said Dr. Smith. “Lower the lamp. Carefully now!”

I saw the knife moving in his competent, swift fingers. For a moment I stared, and then I turned my head away. What I had seen in that brief glance made me sick and faint. It may have been fancy, but as I stared at the wall I had the impression that the doctor was on the verge of collapse. He made no sound, but I was almost certain that he had made some horrible discovery.

“Lower the lamp,” he said. His voice was hoarse and seemed to come from far down within his throat.

I lowered the lamp an inch without turning my head. I

waited for him to reproach me, to swear at me perhaps, but he was as silent as the man on the table. I knew, though, that his fingers were still at work, for I could hear them as they moved about. I could hear his swift, agile fingers moving about the head of Henry Wells.

I suddenly became conscious that my hand was trembling. I wanted to lay down the lamp; I felt that I could no longer hold it.

"Are you nearly through?" I gasped in desperation.

"Hold that lamp steady!" The doctor screamed the command. "If you move that lamp again — I — I won't sew him up. I don't care if they hang me! I'm not a healer of devils!"

I knew not what to do. I could scarcely hold the lamp, and the doctor's threat horrified me.

"Do everything you can," I urged, hysterically. "Give him a chance to fight his way back. He was kind and good — once!"

For a moment there was silence, and I feared that he would not heed me. I momentarily expected him to throw down his scalpel and sponge, and dash across the room and out into the fog. It was not until I heard his fingers moving about again that I knew he had decided to give even the damned a chance.

IT WAS AFTER midnight

when the doctor told me that I could lay down the lamp. I turned with a cry of relief and encountered a face that I shall never forget. In three quarters of an hour the doctor had aged ten years. There were dark hollows beneath his eyes, and his mouth twitched convulsively.

"He'll not live," he said. "He'll be dead in an hour. I did not touch his brain. I could do nothing. When I saw — how things were — I — I — sewed him up immediately."

"What did you see?" I half-whispered.

A look of unutterable fear came into the doctor's eyes. "I saw — I saw . . ." His voice broke and his whole body quivered. "I saw . . . oh, the burning shame of it . . . evil that is without shape, that is formless . . ."

Suddenly he straightened and looked wildly about him.

"They will come here and claim him!" he cried. "They have laid their mark upon him and they will come for him. You must not stay here. This house is marked for destruction!"

I watched him helplessly as he seized his hat and bag and crossed to the door. With white, shaking fingers he drew back the latch, and in a moment his lean figure was silhouetted against a square of swirling vapor.

"Remember that I warned you!" he shouted back; and then the fog swallowed him.

Howard was sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"A malicious trick, that!" he was muttering. "To deliberately drug me! Had I known that glass of water . . ."

"How do you feel?" I asked as I shook him violently by the shoulders. "Do you think you can walk?"

"You drug me, and then ask me to walk! Frank, you're as unreasonable as an artist. What is the matter now?"

I pointed to the silent figure on the table. "Mulligan Wood is safer," I said. "He belongs to them now!"

Howard sprang to his feet and shook me by the arm.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "How do you know?"

"The doctor saw his brain," I explained. "And he also saw something that he would not — could not describe. But he told me that they would come for him, and I believe him."

"We must leave here at once!" cried Howard. "Your doctor was right. We are in deadly danger. Even Mulligan Wood — but we need not return to the wood. There is your launch!"

"There is the launch!" I echoed, faint hope rising in my mind.

"The fog will be a most deadly menace," said Howard grimly. "But even death at sea is preferable to *this* horror."

IT WAS NOT far from the house to the dock, and in less than a minute Howard was seated in the stern of the launch and I was working furiously on the engine. The fog-horns still moaned, but there were no lights visible anywhere in the harbor. We could not see two feet before our faces. The white wreaths of the fog were dimly visible in the darkness, but beyond them stretched endless night, lightless and full of terror.

Howard was speaking. "Somehow I feel that there is death out there," he said.

"There is more death here," I said as I started the engine. "I think I can avoid the rocks. There is very little wind and I know the harbor."

"And of course we shall have the foghorns to guide us," muttered Howard. "I think we had better make for the open sea."

I agreed.

"The launch wouldn't survive a storm," I said, "but I've no desire to remain in the harbor. If we reach the sea we'll probably be picked up by some ship. It would be sheer folly to remain where they can reach us."

"How do we know how far they can reach?" groaned Howard. "What are the distances of Earth to things that have traveled through space? They will overrun Earth. They will destroy us all utterly."

"We'll discuss that later," I

cried as the engine roared into life. "We're going to get as far away from them as possible. Perhaps they haven't *learned* yet! While they've still limitations we may be able to escape."

We moved slowly into the channel, and the sound of the water splashing against the sides of the launch soothed us strangely. At a suggestion from me, Howard had taken the wheel and was slowly bringing her about.

"Keep her steady," I shouted. "There isn't any danger until we get into the Narrows!"

For several minutes I crouched above the engine while Howard steered in silence. Then, suddenly, he turned to me with a gesture of elation.

"I think the fog's lifting," he said.

I stared into the darkness before me. Certainly it seemed less oppressive, and the white spirals of mist that had been continually ascending through it were fading into insubstantial wisps. "Keep her head on," I shouted. "We're in luck. If the fog clears we'll be able to see the Narrows. Keep a sharp lookout for Mulligan Light."

There is no describing the joy that filled us when we saw the light. Yellow and bright it streamed over the water and illuminated sharply the outlines of the great rocks that rose on both sides of the Narrows.

"Let me have the wheel," I

shouted as I stepped quickly forward. "This is a ticklish passage, but we'll come through now with colors flying."

In our excitement and elation we almost forgot the horror that we had left behind us. I stood at the wheel and smiled confidently as we raced over the dark water. Quickly the rocks drew nearer until their vast bulk towered above us.

"We shall certainly make it!" I cried.

But no response came from Howard. I heard him choke and gasp.

"What is the matter?" I asked suddenly, and turning, saw that he was crouching in terror above the engine. His back was turned toward me, but I knew instinctively in which direction he was gazing.

The dim shore that we had left shone like a flaming sunset. Mulligan Wood was burning. Great flames shot up from the highest of the tall trees, and a thick curtain of black smoke rolled slowly eastward, blotting out the few remaining lights in the harbor.

But it was not the flames that caused me to cry out in fear and horror. It was the shape that towered above the trees, the vast, formless shape that moved slowly to and fro across the sky.

GOD KNOWS I tried to believe that I saw nothing. I tried

to believe that the shape was a mere shadow cast by the flames, and I remember that I gripped Howard's arm reassuringly.

"The wood will be destroyed completely," I cried, "and those ghastly things with us will be destroyed with it."

But when Howard turned and shook his head, I knew that the dim, formless thing that towered above the trees was more than a shadow.

"If we see it clearly, we are lost!" he warned, his voice vibrant with terror. "Pray that it remains without form!"

We stood trembling in the darkness, a prey to horror. The shape above Mulligan Wood was slowly growing clearer and I did not think anything could save us. And then, suddenly, I remembered that there was one thing . . .

It is older than the world, I thought, older than all religion. Before the dawn of civilization men knelt in adoration before it. It is present in all mythologies. It is the primal symbol. Perhaps, in the dim past, thousands and thousands of years ago, it was used to — repel the invaders. I shall fight the shape with a high and terrible mystery.

I became suddenly curiously calm. I knew that I had hardly a minute to act, that more than our lives were threatened, but I did not tremble. I reached

calmly beneath the engine and drew out a quantity of cotton waste.

"Howard," I said, "Light a match. It is our only hope. You must strike a match at once."

For what seemed eternities Howard stared at me uncomprehendingly. Then the night was clamorous with his laughter.

"A match!" he shrieked. "A match to warm our little brains! Yes, we shall need a match."

"Trust me!" I entreated. "You must — it is our one hope. Strike a match quickly."

"I do not understand!" Howard was sober now, but his voice quivered.

"I have thought of something that may save us," I said. "Please light this waste for me."

Slowly he nodded. I had told him nothing, but I knew he guessed what I intended to do. Often his insight was uncanny. With fumbling fingers he drew out a match and struck it.

"Be bold," he said. "Show them that you are unafraid. Make the sign boldly."

As the waste caught fire, the form above the trees stood out with a frightful clarity.

I raised the flaming cotton and passed it quickly before my body in a straight line from my left to my right shoulder. Then I raised it to my forehead and lowered it to my knees.

In an instant Howard had

snatched the brand and was repeating the sign. He made two crosses, one against his body and one against the darkness with the torch held at arm's length.

For a moment I shut my eyes, but I could still see the shape above the trees. Then slowly its form became less distinct, became vast and chaotic — and when I opened my eyes it had vanished. I saw nothing but the flaming forest and the shadows cast by the tall trees.

The horror had passed, but I did not move. I stood like an image of stone staring over the black water. Then something seemed to burst in my head. My brain spun dizzily, and I tottered against the rail.

I would have fallen, but Howard caught me about the shoulders. "We're saved!" he shouted. "We've won through."

"I'm glad," I said. But I was too utterly exhausted to really rejoice. My legs gave way beneath me and my head fell forward. All the sights and sounds of Earth were swallowed up in a merciful blackness.

2

HOWARD WAS writing when I entered the room.

"How is the story going?" I asked.

For a moment he ignored my question. Then he slowly turned and faced me. He was

hollow-eyed, and his pallor was alarming.

"It's not going well," he said at last. "It doesn't satisfy me. There are problems that still elude me. I haven't been able to capture *all* of the horror of the thing in Mulligan Wood."

I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I want you to explain that horror to me," I said. "For three weeks I have waited for you to speak. I know that you have some knowledge which you are concealing from me. What was the damp, spongy thing that landed on Wells' head in the woods? Why did we hear a droning as we fled in the fog? What was the meaning of the shape that we saw above the trees? And why, in heaven's name, didn't the horror spread as we feared it might? What stopped it? Howard, what do you think really happened to Wells' brain? Did his body burn with the farm, or did they — *claim* it? And the other body that was found in Mulligan Wood — that lean, blackened horror with riddled head — how do you explain that?"

(Two days after the fire a skeleton had been found in Mulligan Wood. A few fragments of burnt flesh still adhered to the bones, and the skullcap was missing.)

It was a long time before Howard spoke again. He sat with bowed head fingering his notebook, and his body trembled all over. At last he raised his

eyes. They shone with a wild light and his lips were ashen.

"Yes," he said. "We will discuss the horror together. Last week I did not want to speak of it. It seemed too awful to put into words. But I shall never rest in peace until I have woven it into a story, until I have made my readers feel and see that dreadful, unspeakable thing. And I cannot write of it until I am convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that I understand it myself. It may help me to talk about it.

"You have asked me what the damp thing was that fell on Wells' head. I believe that it was a human brain — the essence of a human brain drawn out through a hole, or holes, in a human head. I believe the brain was drawn out by imperceptible degrees, and reconstructed again by the horror. I believe that for some purpose of its own it used human brains — perhaps to learn from them. Or perhaps it merely played with them. The blackened, riddled body in Mulligan Wood? That was the body of the first victim, some poor fool who got lost between the tall trees. I rather suspect the trees helped. I think the horror endowed them with a strange life. Anyhow, the poor chap lost his brain. The horror took it, and played with it, and then accidentally dropped it. It dropped it on Wells' head. Wells said that the long, thin and very

white arm he saw was looking for something that it had dropped. Of course Wells didn't really see the arm objectively, but the horror that is without form or color had already entered his brain and clothed itself in human thought.

"As for the droning that we heard and the shape we thought we saw above the burning forest — that was the horror seeking to make itself felt, seeking to break down barriers, seeking to enter our brains and clothe itself with our thoughts. It almost got us. If we had seen the white arm we should have been lost."

HOWARD WALKED to the window. He drew back the curtains and gazed for a moment at the crowded harbor and the tall, white buildings that towered against the moon. He was staring at the skyline of lower Manhattan. Sheer beneath him the cliffs of Brooklyn Heights loomed darkly.

"Why didn't they conquer?" he cried. "They could have destroyed us utterly. They could have wiped us from Earth — all our wealth and power would have gone down before them."

I shivered. "Yes . . . why didn't the horror spread?" I asked.

Howard shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. Perhaps they discovered that human brains were too trivial and ab-

surd to bother with. Perhaps we ceased to amuse them. Perhaps they grew tired of us. But it is conceivable that the sign destroyed them — or sent them back through space. I think they came millions of years ago, and were frightened away by the sign. When they discovered that we had not forgotten the use of the sign they may have fled in terror. Certainly there has been no manifestation for three weeks. I think that they are gone."

"And Henry Wells?" I asked.

"Well, his body was not found. I imagine they came for him."

"And you honestly intend to put this — this obscenity into a story? Oh, my God! The whole thing is so incredible, so unheard of, that I can't believe it. Did we not dream it all? Were we ever really in Partridgeville? Did we sit in an ancient house and discuss frightful things while the fog curled about us? Did we walk through that unholy wood? Were the trees really alive, and did Henry Wells run about on his hands and knees like a wolf?"

Howard sat down quietly and rolled up his sleeve. He thrust his thin arm toward me.

"Can you argue away that scar?" he said. "There are the marks of the beast that attacked me — the man-beast that was Henry Wells. A dream? I would cut off this arm immediately at

the elbow if you could convince me that it was a dream."

I walked to the window and remained for a long time staring at Manhattan. There, I thought, is something substantial. It is absurd to imagine that anything could destroy it. It is absurd to imagine that the horror was really as terrible as it seemed to us in Partridgeville. I must persuade Howard not to write about it. We must both try to forget it.

I returned to where he sat and laid my hand on his shoulder.

"You'll give up the idea of putting it into a story?" I urged gently.

"Never!" He was on his feet, and his eyes were blazing. "Do you think I would give up now when I've almost captured it? I shall write a story that will penetrate to the inmost core of a horror that is without form and substance, but more terrible than a plague-stricken city when the cadences of a tolling bell sound an end to all hope. I shall surpass Poe. I shall surpass all the masters."

"Surpass them and be damned then," I said angrily. "That way madness lies, but it is useless to argue with you. Your egoism is too colossal."

I turned and walked swiftly out of the room. It occurred to me as I descended the stairs that I had made an idiot of myself with my fears, but even as I went down I looked fearfully

back over my shoulder, as though I expected a great stone weight to descend from above and crush me to the earth. *He should forget the horror*, I thought. *He should wipe it from his mind. He will go mad if he writes about it.*

THREE DAYS passed before I saw Howard again.

"Come in," he said in a curiously hoarse voice when I knocked on his door.

I found him in dressing-gown and slippers, and I knew as soon as I saw him that he was terribly exultant.

"I have triumphed, Frank!" he cried. "I have reproduced the form that is formless, the burning shame that man has not looked upon, the crawling, fleshless obscenity that sucks at our brains!"

Before I could so much as gasp he had placed the bulky manuscript in my hands.

"Read it, Frank," he commanded. "Sit down at once and read it!"

I crossed to the window and sat down on the lounge. I sat there oblivious to everything but the typewritten sheets before me. I confess that I was consumed with curiosity. I had never questioned Howard's power. With words he wrought miracles; breaths from the unknown blew always over his pages, and things that had passed beyond Earth returned at his bidding.

But could he even suggest the horror that we had known? — could he even so much as hint at the loathsome, crawling thing that had claimed the brain of Henry Wells?

I read the story through. I read it slowly, and clutched at the pillows beside me in a frenzy of loathing. As soon as I had finished it Howard snatched it from me. He evidently suspected that I desired to tear it to shreds.

"What do you think of it?" he cried exultantly.

"It is indescribably foul!" I exclaimed. "It violates privacies of the mind that should never be laid bare."

"But you will concede that I have made the horror convincing?"

I nodded and reached for my hat. "You have made it so convincing that I can not remain and discuss it with you. I intend to walk until morning. I intend to walk until I am too weary to care, or think, or remember."

"It is a very great story!" he shouted at me, but I passed down the stair and out of the house without replying.

3

IT WAS PAST midnight when the telephone rang. I laid down the book I was reading and lowered the receiver.

"Hello. Who is there?" I asked.

"Frank, this is Howard!" The voice was strangely high-pitched. "Come as quickly as you can. *They've come back!* And Frank, the sign is powerless. I've tried the sign, but the droning is getting louder, and a dim shape . . ." Howard's voice trailed off disastrously.

I fairly screamed into the receiver. "Courage, man! Do not let them suspect that you are afraid. Make the sign again and again. I will come at once."

Howard's voice came again, more hoarsely this time. "The shape is growing clearer and clearer. And there is nothing I can do! Frank, I have lost the power to make the sign. I have forfeited all right to the protection of the sign. I've become a priest of the Devil. That story — I should not have written that story."

"Show them that you are unafraid!" I cried.

"I'll try! I'll try! Ah, my God! The shape is . . ."

I did not wait to hear more. Frantically seizing my hat and coat I dashed down the stairs and out into the street. As I reached the curb a dizziness seized me. I clung to a lamp post to keep from falling, and waved my hand madly at a fleeing taxi. Luckily the driver saw me. The car stopped and I staggered out into the street and climbed into it.

"Quick!" I shouted. "Take me to Ten Brooklyn Heights!"

"Yes, sir. Cold night, ain't it?"

"Cold!" I shouted. "It will be cold indeed when they get in. It will be cold indeed when they start to . . ."

The driver stared at me in amazement. "That's all right, sir," he said. "We'll get you home all right, sir. Brooklyn Heights, did you say, sir?"

"Brooklyn Heights," I groaned, and collapsed against the cushions.

As the car raced forward I tried not to think of the horror that awaited me. I clutched desperately at straws. *It is conceivable, I thought, that Howard has gone temporarily insane. How could the horror have found him among so many millions of people? It can not be that they have deliberately sought him out. It can not be that they would deliberately choose him from among such multitudes. He is too insignificant — all human beings are too insignificant. They would never deliberately angle for human beings. They would never deliberately trawl for human beings — but they did seek Henry Wells. And what did Howard say? 'I have become a priest of the Devil.' Why not their priest? What if Howard has become their priest on Earth? What if his story has made him their priest?*

The thought was a nightmare to me, and I put it furiously from me. *He will have courage to*

resist them, I thought. He will show them that he is not afraid.

"Here we are, sir. Shall I help you in, sir?"

The car had stopped, and I groaned as I realized that I was about to enter what might prove to be my tomb. I descended to the sidewalk and handed the driver all the change that I possessed. He stared at me in amazement.

"You've given me too much," he said. "Here, sir . . ."

But I waved him aside and dashed up the stoop of the house before me. As I fitted a key into the door I could hear him muttering: "Craziest drunk I ever seen! He gives me four bucks to drive him ten blocks, and doesn't want no thanks or nothin' . . ."

THE LOWER HALL was unlighted. I stood at the foot of the stairs and shouted. "I'm here, Howard! Can you come down?"

There was no answer. I waited for perhaps ten seconds, but not a sound came from the room above.

"I'm coming up!" I shouted in desperation, and started to climb the stairs. I was trembling all over. *They've got him, I thought. I'm too late. Perhaps I had better not — great God, what was that?*

I was unbelievably terrified. There was no mistaking the sounds. In the room above, someone was volubly pleading and crying aloud in agony. Was

it Howard's voice that I heard? I caught a few words indistinctly. "Crawling — ugh! Crawling — ugh! Oh, have pity! Cold and clee-ar. Crawling — ugh! God in heaven!"

I had reached the landing, and when the pleadings rose to hoarse shrieks I fell to my knees, and made against my body, and upon the wall beside me, and in the air — the sign. I made the primal sign that had saved us in Mulligan Wood, but this time I made it crudely, not with fire, but with fingers that trembled and caught at my clothes, and I made it without courage or hope, made it darkly, with a conviction that nothing could save me.

And then I got up quickly and went on up the stairs. My prayer was that they would take me quickly, that my sufferings should be brief under the stars.

THE DOOR of Howard's room was ajar. By a tremendous effort I stretched out my hand and grasped the knob. Slowly I swung it inward.

For a moment I saw nothing but the motionless form of Howard lying upon the floor. He was lying upon his back. His knees were drawn up and he had raised his hand before his face, palms outward, as if to blot out a vision unspeakable.

Upon entering the room I had deliberately, by lowering my eyes, narrowed my range of vi-

sion. I saw only the floor and the lower section of the room. I did not want to raise my eyes. I had lowered them in self-protection because I dreaded what the room held.

I did not want to raise my eyes, but there were forces, powers at work in the room which I could not resist. I knew that if I looked up, the horror might destroy me, but I had no choice.

Slowly, painfully, I raised my eyes and stared across the room. It would have been better, I think, if I had rushed forward immediately and surrendered to the thing that towered there. The vision of that terrible, darkly shrouded shape will come between me and the pleasures of the world as long as I remain in the world.

From the ceiling to the floor it towered, and it threw off blinding light. And pierced by the shafts, whirling around and around, were the pages of Howard's story.

In the center of the room, between the ceiling and the floor, the pages whirled about, and the light burned through the sheets, and descending in spiral-

ing shafts entered the brain of my poor friend. Into his head, the light was pouring in a continuous stream, and above, the Master of the light moved with a slow swaying of its entire bulk. I screamed and covered my eyes with my hands, but still the Master moved — back and forth, back and forth. And still the light poured into the brain of my friend.

And then there came from the mouth of the Master a most awful sound . . . I had forgotten the sign that I had made three times below in the darkness. I had forgotten the high and terrible mystery before which all of the invaders were powerless. But when I saw it forming itself in the room, forming itself immaculately, with a terrible integrity above the downstreaming light, I knew that I was saved.

I sobbed and fell upon my knees. The light dwindled, and the Master shriveled before my eyes.

And then from the walls, from the ceiling, from the floor, there leapt flame — a white and cleansing flame that consumed, that devoured and destroyed forever.

But my friend was dead.



The Faceless Thing

by Edward D. Hoch

If the "monster" story seems a little passe, it is not due to the fact that this theme has been exhausted; it's rather due to the endless repetitions of the tedious hobby of the ubiquitous Frankenstein family with which we are regaled. A most unkind fate for what was originally an excellent, penetrating novel — which bears little resemblance to the Hollywood versions of it.

Here is a fresh approach . . .

SUNSET: golden flaming clouds draped over distant canyons barely seen in the dusk of the dying day; farmland gone to rot; fields in the foreground given over wildly to the running of the rabbit and the woodchuck; the farmhouse gray and paint-peeled, sleeping possibly but more likely dead — needing burial.

It hadn't changed much in all those years. It hadn't changed; only died.

He parked the car and got out, taking it all in with eyes still intent and quick for all their years. Somehow he hadn't really thought it would still be standing. Farmhouses that were near collapse fifty years ago shouldn't still be standing; not when all the people, his mother and father and aunt and the rest, were all long in their graves.

He was an old man, had been an old man almost as long as

he could remember. Youth to him was only memories of this farm, so many years before, romping in the hay with his little sister at his side; swinging from the barn ropes, exploring endless dark depths out beyond the last field. After that, he was old — through misty college days and marriage to a woman he hadn't loved, through a business and political career that carried him around the world. And never once in all those years had he journeyed back to this place, this farmhouse now given over to the weeds and insects. They were all dead; there was no reason to come back . . . no reason at all.

Except the memory of the ooze.

A childhood memory, a memory buried with the years, forgotten sometimes but always there, crowded into its own little space in his mind, was ready to confront him and startle him with its vividness.

The ooze was a place beyond the last field, where water always collected in the spring-time and after a storm; water running over dirt and clay and rock, merging with the soil until there was nothing underfoot but a black ooze to rise above your boots. He'd followed the stream rushing with storm water, followed it to the place where it cut into the side of the hill.

It was the memory of the

tunnel, really, that had brought him back — the dark tunnel leading nowhere, gurgling with rain-fed water, barely large enough for him to fit through. A tunnel floored with unseen ooze, peopled by unknown danger; that was a place for every boy.

Had he only been ten that day? Certainly he'd been no more than eleven, leading the way while his nine-year-old sister followed. "This way. Be careful of the mud." She'd been afraid of the dark, afraid of what they might find there. But he'd called encouragement to her; after all, what could there be in all this ooze to hurt them?

How many years? Fifty?

"What is it, Buddy?" She'd always called him Buddy. What is it, Buddy? Only darkness, and a place maybe darker than dark, with a half-formed shadow rising from the ooze. He'd brought along his father's old lantern, and he fumbled to light it.

"Buddy!" she'd screamed — just once — and in the flare of the match he'd seen the thing, great and hairy and covered with ooze; something that lived in the darkness here, something that hated the light. In that terrifying instant it had reached out for his little sister and pulled her into the ooze.

THAT WAS THE memory, a memory that came to him some-

times only at night. It had pursued him down the years like a fabled hound, coming to him, reminding him, when all was well with the world. It was like a personal demon sent from Hades to torture him. He'd never told anyone about that thing in the ooze, not even his mother. They'd cried and carried on when his sister was found the next day, and they'd said she'd drowned. He was not one to say differently.

And the years had passed. For a time, during his high school days, he read the local papers — searching for some word of the thing, some veiled news that it had come out of that forgotten cavern. But it never did; it liked the dark and damp too much. And, of course, no one else ever ventured into the stream bed. That was a pursuit only for the very young and very foolish.

By the time he was twenty, the memory was fading, merging with other thoughts, other goals, until at times he thought it only a child's dream. But then at night it would come again in all its vividness, and the thing in the ooze would beckon him.

A long life, long and crowded . . . One night he'd tried to tell his wife about it, but she wouldn't listen. That was the night he'd realized how little he'd ever loved her. Perhaps he'd only married her because,

in a certain light, she reminded him of that sister of his youth. But the love that sometimes comes later came not at all to the two of them. She was gone now, like his youth, like his family and friends. There was only this memory remaining. The memory of a thing in the ooze.

Now the weeds were tall, beating against his legs, stirring nameless insects to flight with every step. He pressed a handkerchief against his brow, sponging the sweat that was forming there. Would the dark place still be there, or had fifty years of rain and dirt sealed it forever?

"Hello there," a voice called out. It was an old voice, barely carrying with the breeze. He turned and saw someone on the porch of the deserted farmhouse. An old woman, ancient and wrinkled.

"Do I know you?" he asked, moving closer.

"You may," she answered. "You're Buddy, aren't you? My, how old I've gotten. I used to live at the next farm, when you were just a boy. I was young then myself. I remember you."

"Oh! Mrs. . . .?" The name escaped him, but it wasn't important.

"Why did you come back, Buddy? Why, after all these years?"

He was an old man. Was it necessary to explain his actions

to this woman from the past? "I just wanted to see the place," he answered. "Memories, you know."

"Bitter memories. Your little sister died here, did she not?" The old woman should have been dead, should have been dead and in her grave long ago.

He paused in the shade of the porch roof. "She died here, yes, but that was fifty years ago."

"How old we grow, how ancient! Is that why you returned?"

"In a way. I wanted to see the spot."

"Ah! The little brook back there beyond the last field. Let me walk that way with you. These old legs need exercise."

"Do you live here?" he asked, wanting to escape her now but knowing not how.

"No, still down the road. All alone now. Are you all alone, too?"

"I suppose so." The high grass made walking difficult.

"You know what they all said at the time, don't you? They all said you were fooling around, like you always did, and pushed her into the water."

There was a pain in his chest from breathing so hard. He was an old man. "Do you believe that?"

"What does it matter?" she answered. "After all these fifty years, what does it matter?"

"Would you believe me," he began, then hesitated into silence. Of course she wouldn't believe him, but he had to tell now. "Would you believe me if I told you what happened?"

SHE WAS A very old woman and she panted to keep up even his slow pace. She was ancient even to his old eyes, even in his world where now everyone was old. "I would believe you," she said.

"There was something in the ooze. Call it a monster, a demon, if you want. I saw it in the light of a match, and I can remember it as if it were yesterday. It took her."

"Perhaps," she said.

"You don't believe me."

"I said I would. This sun is not today, even at twilight."

"It will be gone soon. I hate to hurry you, old woman, but I must reach the stream before dark."

"The last field is in sight."

Yes, it was in sight. But how would he ever fit through that small opening, how would he face the thing, even if by some miracle it still waited there in the ooze? Fifty years was a long long time.

"Wait here," he said as they reached the little stream at last. It hadn't changed much, not really.

"You won't find it." He lowered his aged body into the bed of the stream, feeling once

again the familiar forgotten ooze closing over his shoes.

"No one has to know," she called after him. "Even if there was something, that was fifty years ago."

But he went on, to the place where the water vanished into the rock. He held his breath and groped for the little flashlight in his pocket. Then he ducked his head and followed the water into the black.

It was steamy here, steamy and hot with the sweat of the earth. He flipped on the flashlight with trembling hands and followed its narrow beam with his eyes. The place was almost like a room in the side of the hill, a room perhaps seven feet high, with a floor of mud and ooze that seemed almost to bubble as he watched.

"Come on," he said softly, almost to himself. "I know you're there. You've got to be there."

And then he saw it, rising slowly from the ooze. A shapeless thing without a face, a thing that moved so slowly it might have been dead. An old,

very old thing. For a long time he watched it, unable to move, unable to cry out. And even as he watched, the thing settled back softly into the ooze, as if even this small exertion had tired it.

"Rest," he said, very quietly. "We are all so old now."

And then he made his way back out of the cave, along the stream, and finally pulled himself from the clinging ooze. The ancient woman was still waiting on the bank, with fireflies playing about her in the dusk.

"Did you find anything?" she asked him.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Fifty years is a long time. You shouldn't have come back."

He sighed and fell into step beside her. "It was something I had to do."

"Come up to my house, if you want. I can make you a bit of tea."

His breath was coming better now, and the distance back to the farmhouse seemed shorter than he'd remembered. "I think I'd like that," he said . . .



The Red Room

by H. G. Wells

In the nineteenth century, there seemed to be a general agreement among writers of fiction that the reader needed to be told everything — that if the author did not explicitly state, over and over, that something evil was bad, that bad deeds were wicked, that a virtuous person was good, that something fearful was frightening, etc., the reader would just never, never know. This tiresome manner of writing was still going on when H. G. Wells wrote, "The Red Room"; fortunately, he did not follow it. If the events in this story do not give you a chill, at least the author does not insult your intelligence by reiterating how chilling it all is.

"I CAN ASSURE you," said I, "that it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me." And I stood up before the fire with my glass in my hand.

"It is your own choosing," said the man with the withered arm, and glanced at me askance.

"Eight-and-twenty years," said I, "I have lived, and never a ghost have I seen as yet."

The old woman sat staring hard into the fire, her pale eyes wide open. "Ay," she broke in, "and eight-and-twenty years you have lived, and never seen the likes of this house, I reckon. There's a many things to see, when one's still but eight-and-twenty." She swayed her head slowly from side to side. "A many things to see and sorrow for."

I half suspected these old people were trying to enhance the spectral terrors of their house by this droning insistence. I put down my empty glass on the table, and, looking about the room, caught a glimpse of myself, abbreviated and broadened to an impossible sturdiness, in the queer old mirror beside the china cupboard. "Well," I said, "if I see anything tonight, I shall be so much the wiser. For I come to the business with an open mind."

"It's your own choosing," said the man with the withered arm once more.

I heard the faint sound of a stick and a shambling step on the flags in the passage outside. The door creaked on its hinges as a second old man entered, more bent, more wrinkled, more aged even than the first. He supported himself by the help of a crutch, his eyes were covered by a shade, and his lower lip, half averted, hung pale and pink from his decaying yellow teeth. He made straight for an armchair on the opposite side of the table, sat down clumsily, and began to cough. The man with the withered hand gave the newcomer a short glance of positive dislike; the old woman took no notice of his arrival, but remained with her eyes fixed steadily on the fire.

"I said — it's your own choos-

ing," said the man with the withered hand, when the coughing had ceased for a while.

"It's my own choosing," I answered.

THE MAN WITH the shade became aware of my presence for the first time, and threw his head back for a moment, and sidewise, to see me. I caught a momentary glimpse of his eyes, small, bright and inflamed. Then he began to cough and splutter again.

"Why don't you drink?" said the man with the withered arm, pushing the beer toward him. The man with the shade poured out a glassful with a shaking hand, that splashed half as much again on the deal table. A monstrous shadow of him crouched upon the wall, and mocked his action as he poured and drank. I must confess I had scarcely expected these grotesque custodians. There is, to my mind, something inhuman in senility, something crouching and atavistic; the human qualities seem to drop from old people insensibly day by day. The three of them made me feel uncomfortable with their gaunt silences, their bent carriage, their evident unfriendliness to me and to one another. And that night, perhaps, I was in the mood for uncomfortable impressions. I resolved to get away from their vague foresha-

dowings of the evil things upstairs.

"If," said I, "you will show me to this haunted room of yours, I will relieve you from the task of entertaining me."

"There's a candle on the slab outside the door," said the man with the withered hand, looking at my feet as he addressed me. "But if you go to the Red Room tonight . . ."

"This night of all nights!" said the old woman, softly. ". . . You go alone."

"Very well," I answered shortly, "and which way do I go?"

"You go along the passage for a bit," said he, nodding his head on his shoulder at the door, "until you come to a spiral staircase. On the second landing is a door covered with green baize. Go through that, and down the long corridor to the end, and the Red Room is on your left up the steps."

"Have I got that right?" I said, and repeated his directions.

He corrected me in one particular.

"And you are really going?" said the man with the shade, looking at me again for the third time with that queer, unnatural tilting of the face.

"This night of all nights!" whispered the old woman.

"It is what I came for," I said, and moved toward the door. As I did so, the old man

with the shade rose and staggered round the table, so as to be closer to the others and to the fire. At the door I turned and looked at them, and saw they were all close together, dark against the firelight, staring at me over their shoulders, with an intent expression on their ancient faces.

"Goodnight," I said, setting the door open.

"It's your own choosing," said the man with the withered arm.

I LEFT THE door wide open until the candle was well alight, and then I shut them in, and walked down the chilly, echoing passage.

I must confess that the oddness of these three old pensioners in whose charge her ladyship had left the castle, and the deep-toned, old-fashioned furniture of the housekeeper's room, in which they forgathered, had affected me curiously in spite of my effort to keep myself at a matter-of-fact phase. They seemed to belong to another age, an older age, an age when things spiritual were indeed to be feared, when common sense was uncommon, an age when omens and witches were credible, and ghosts beyond denying. Their very existence, thought I, is spectral; the cut of their clothing, fashions born in dead brains; the ornaments and conveniences in the room

about them even are ghostly — the thoughts of vanished men, which still haunt rather than participate in the world of today. And the passage I was in, long and shadowy, with a film of moisture glistening on the wall, was as gaunt and cold as a thing that is dead and rigid. But with an effort I sent such thoughts to the right-about. The long, drafty subterranean passage was chilly and dusty, and my candle flared and made the shadows cower and quiver. The echoes rang up and down the spiral staircase, and a shadow came sweeping up after me, and another fled before me into the darkness overhead. I came to the wide landing and stopped there for a moment listening to a rustling that I fancied I heard creeping behind me, and then, satisfied of the absolute silence, pushed open the unwilling baize-covered door and stood in the silent corridor.

The effect was scarcely what I expected, for the moonlight, coming in by the great window on the grand staircase, picked out everything in vivid black shadow or reticulated silvery illumination. Everything seemed in its proper position; the house might have been deserted on the yesterday instead of twelve months ago. There were candles in the sockets of the sconces, and whatever dust had

gathered on the carpets or upon the polished flooring was distributed so evenly as to be invisible in my candlelight. A waiting stillness was over everything. I was about to advance, and stopped abruptly. A bronze group stood upon the landing hidden from me by a corner of the wall; but its shadow fell with marvelous distinctness upon the white paneling, and gave me the impression of some one crouching to waylay me. The thing jumped upon my attention suddenly. I stood rigid for half a moment, perhaps. Then, with my hand in the pocket that held the revolver, I advanced, only to discover a Ganymede and Eagle, glistening in the moonlight. That incident for a time restored my nerve, and a dim porcelain Chinaman on a buhl table, whose head rocked as I passed, scarcely startled me.

The door of the Red Room and the steps up to it were in a shadowy corner. I moved my candle from side to side in order to see clearly the nature of the recess in which I stood, before opening the door. Here it was, thought I, that my predecessor was found, and the memory of that story gave me a sudden twinge of apprehension. I glanced over my shoulder at the black Ganymede in the moonlight, and opened the door of the Red Room rather hastily, with my face half

turned to the pallid silence of the corridor.

I ENTERED, closed the door behind me at once, turned the key I found in the lock within, and stood with the candle held aloft surveying the scene of my vigil, the great Red Room of Lorraine Castle, in which the young Duke had died; or rather in which he had begun his dying, for he had opened the door and fallen headlong down the steps I had just ascended. That had been the end of his vigil, of his gallant attempt to conquer the ghostly tradition of the place, and never, I thought, had apoplexy better served the ends of superstition. There were other and older stories that clung to the room, back to the half-incredible beginning of it all, the tale of a timid wife and the tragic end that came to her husband's jest of frightening her. And looking round that huge shadowy room with its black window bays, its recesses and alcoves, its dusty brown-red hangings and dark gigantic furniture, one could well understand the legends that had sprouted in its black corners, its germinating darknesses. My candle was a little tongue of light in the vastness of the chamber; its rays failed to pierce to the opposite end of the room, and left an ocean of dull red mystery and suggestion, sentinel shadows and

watching darknesses beyond its island of light. And the stillness of desolation brooded over it all.

I must confess some impalpable quality of that ancient room disturbed me. I tried to fight the feeling down. I resolved to make a systematic examination of the place, and so, by leaving nothing to the imagination, dispel the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity before they obtained a hold upon me. After satisfying myself of the fastening of the door, I began to walk round the room, peering round each article of furniture, tucking up the valances of the bed and opening its curtains wide. In one place there was a distinct echo to my footsteps, the noises I made seemed so little that they enhanced rather than broke the silence of the place. I pulled up the blinds and examined the fastenings of the several windows. Attracted by the fall of a particle of dust, I leaned forward and looked up the blackness of the wide chimney. Then, trying to preserve my scientific attitude of mind, I walked round and began tapping the oak paneling for any secret opening, but I desisted before reaching the alcove. I saw my face in a mirror — white.

There were two big mirrors in the room, each with a pair of sconces bearing candles, and on the mantelshelf, too, were

candles in china candlesticks. All these I lit one after the other. The fire was laid — an unexpected consideration from the old housekeeper — and I lit it, to keep down any disposition to shiver, and when it was burning well I stood round with my back to it and regarded the room again. I had pulled up a chintz-covered armchair and a table to form a kind of barricade before me. On this lay my revolver, ready to hand. My precise examination had done me a little good, but I still found the remoter darkness of the place and its perfect stillness too stimulating for the imagination. The echoing of the stir and crackling of the fire was no sort of comfort to me. The shadow in the alcove at the end of the room began to display that undefinable quality of a presence, that odd suggestion of a lurking living thing that comes so easily in silence and solitude. And to reassure myself, I walked with a candle into it and satisfied myself that there was nothing tangible there. I stood that candle upon the floor of the alcove and left it in that position.

BY THIS TIME I was in a state of considerable nervous tension, although to my reason there was no adequate cause for my condition. My mind, however, was perfectly clear. I postulated quite unreservedly

that nothing supernatural could happen, and to pass the time I began stringing some rhymes together, Ingoldsby fashion, concerning the original legend of the place. A few I spoke aloud, but the echoes were not pleasant. For the same reason I also abandoned, after a time, a conversation with myself upon the impossibility of ghosts and haunting. My mind reverted to the three old and distorted people downstairs, and I tried to keep it upon that topic.

The somber reds and grays of the room troubled me; even with its seven candles the place was merely dim. The light in the alcove flaring in a draft, and the fire flickering, kept the shadows and penumbra perpetually shifting and stirring in a noiseless flighty dance. Casting about for a remedy, I recalled the wax candles I had seen in the corridor, and, with a slight effort, carrying a candle and leaving the door open, I walked out into the moonlight, and presently returned with as many as ten. These I put in the various knick-knacks of china with which the room was sparsely adorned, and lit and placed them where the shadows had lain deepest, some on the floor, some in the window recesses, arranging and rearranging them until at last my seventeen candles were so placed that not an inch of the room but had the direct light of at least one of

them. It occurred to me that when the ghost came I could warn him not to trip over them. The room was now quite brightly illuminated. There was something very cheering and reassuring in these little silent streaming flames, and to notice their steady diminution of length offered me an occupation and gave me a reassuring sense of the passage of time.

Even with that, however, the brooding expectation of the vigil weighed heavily enough upon me. I stood watching the minute hand of my watch creep towards midnight.

THEN SOMETHING happened in the alcove. I did not see the candle go out, I simply turned and saw that the darkness was there, as one might start and see the unexpected presence of a stranger. The black shadow had sprung back to its place. "By Jove," said I aloud, recovering from my surprise, "that draft's a strong one." Taking the matchbox from the table, I walked across the room in a leisurely manner to relight the corner again. My first match would not strike, and as I succeeded with the second, something seemed to blink on the wall before me. I turned my head involuntarily and saw that the two candles on the little table by the fireplace were extinguished. I rose at once to my feet.

"Odd," I said. "Did I do that myself in a flash of absent-mindedness?"

I walked back, relit one, and as I did so I saw the candle in the right sconce of one of the mirrors wink and go right out, and almost immediately its companion followed it. The flames vanished as if the wick had been suddenly nipped between a finger and thumb, leaving the wick neither glowing nor smoking, but black. While I stood gaping the candle at the foot of the bed went out, and the shadows seemed to take another step toward me.

"This won't do!" said I, and first one and then another candle on the mantelshelf followed.

"What's up?" I cried, with a queer high note getting into my voice somehow. At that the candle on the corner of the wardrobe went out, and the one I had relit in the alcove followed.

"Steady on!" I said, "those candles are wanted," speaking with a half-hysterical facetiousness, and scratching away at a match the while, "for the mantel candlesticks." My hands trembled so much that twice I missed the rough paper of the matchbox. As the mantel emerged from darkness again, two candles in the remoter end of the room were eclipsed. But with the same match I also relit the larger mirror candles, and

those on the floor near the doorway, so that for the moment I seemed to gain on the extinctions. But then in a noiseless volley there vanished four lights at once in different corners of the room, and I struck another match in quivering haste, and stood hesitating whither to take it.

AS I STOOD undecided, an invisible hand seemed to sweep out the two candles on the table. With a cry of terror I dashed at the alcove, then into the corner and then into the window, relighting three as two more vanished by the fireplace, and then, perceiving a better way, I dropped matches on the iron-bound deedbox in the corner, and caught up the bedroom candlestick. With this I avoided the delay of striking matches, but for all that the steady process of extinction went on, and the shadows I feared and fought against returned, and crept in upon me, first a step gained on this side of me, then on that. I was now almost frantic with the horror of the coming darkness, and my self-possession deserted me. I leaped panting from candle to candle in a vain struggle against that remorseless advance.

I bruised myself in the thigh against a table, I sent a chair headlong. I stumbled and fell and whisked the cloth from the

table in my fall. My candle rolled away from me and I snatched another as I rose. Abruptly this was blown out as I swung it off the table by the wind of my sudden movement, and immediately the two remaining candles followed. But there was light still in the room, a red light, that streamed across the ceiling and staved off the shadows from me. The fire! Of course I could still thrust my candle between the bars and relight it!

I turned to where the flames were still dancing between the glowing coals and splashing red reflections upon the furniture; made two steps toward the grate, and incontinently the flames dwindled and vanished, the glow vanished the reflections rushed together and disappeared, and as I thrust the candle between the bars darkness closed upon me like the shutting of an eye, wrapped about me in a stifling embrace, sealed my vision, and crushed the last vestiges of self-possession from my brain. And it was not only palpable darkness, but intolerable terror. The candle fell from my hands. I flung out my arms in a vain effort to thrust that ponderous blackness away from me, and lifting up my voice, screamed with all my might, once, twice, thrice. Then I think I must have staggered to my feet. I know I thought suddenly of the moonlit corridor,

and with my head bowed and my arms over my face, made a stumbling run for the door.

But I had forgotten the exact position of the door, and I struck myself heavily against the corner of the bed. I staggered back, turned, and was either struck or struck myself against some other bulky furnishing. I have a vague memory of battering myself thus to and fro in the darkness, of a heavy blow at last upon my forehead, of a horrible sensation of falling that lasted an age, of my last frantic effort to keep my footing, and then I remember no more.

I OPENED MY eyes in daylight. My head was roughly bandaged, and the man with the withered hand was watching my face. I looked about me trying to remember what had happened, and for a space I could not recollect. I rolled my eyes into the corner and saw the old woman, no longer abstracted, no longer terrible, pouring out some drops of medicine from a little blue phial into a glass. "Where am I?" I said. "I seem to remember you, and yet I can not remember who you are."

They told me then, and I heard of the haunted Red Room as one who hears a tale. "We found you at dawn," said he, "and there was blood on your forehead and lips."

I wondered that I had ever disliked him. The three of them in the daylight seemed commonplace old folk enough. The man with the green shade had his head bent as one who sleeps.

It was very slowly I recovered the memory of my experience. "You believe now," said the old man with the withered hand, "that the room is haunted?" He spoke no longer as one who greets an intruder, but as one who condoles with a friend.

"Yes," said I, "the room is haunted."

"And you have seen it. And we who have been here all our lives have never set eyes upon it. Because we have never dared. Tell us, is it truly the old earl who . . ."

"No," said I, "it is not."

"I told you so," said the old lady, with the glass in her hand. "It is his poor young countess who was frightened . . ."

"It is not," I said. "There is neither ghost of earl nor ghost of countess in that room. There is no ghost there at all, but worse, far worse, something impalpable . . ."

"Well?" they said.

"The worst of all things that haunt poor mortal men," said I; "and that is, in all its nakedness — 'Fear!' Fear that will not have light nor sound, that will not bear with reason, that deafens and darkens and over-

whelms. It followed me through the corridor, it fought against me in the room . . .”

I stopped abruptly. There was an interval of silence. My hand went up to my bandages. “The candles went out one after another, and I fled . . .”

Then the man with the shade lifted his face sideways to see me and spoke.

“That is it,” said he. “I knew that was it. A Power of Dark-

ness. To put such a curse upon a home! It lurks there always. You can feel it even in the day-time, even of a bright summer’s day, in the hangings, in the curtains, keeping behind you however you face about. In the dusk it creeps into the corridor and follows you, so that you dare not turn. It is even as you say. Fear itself is in that room. Black Fear . . . And there it will be . . . so long as this house of sin endures.”

THE HILL OF DIONYSUS

In our last issue, we told you about the plans for issuing a volume of poetry by the late master of weird fiction and poetry, Clark Ashton Smith. The volume was to be entitled, “The Hill Of Dionysus”, a collection of love lyrics, and was to be published by Mr. Roy Squires, working with Mrs. Carol Smith.

A slight correction is in order; the volume is the joint effort of Mr. Squires and Mr. Clyde Beck. Mr. Squires has advised us that the volume has now appeared, and that the following editions and quantities are offered:

65 copies on Warren’s Antique, paper cover, \$3.75.
100 copies on the same paper, casebound in half cloth, \$6.50. 15 copies on Hamilton Andorra, case-bound in full cloth, with poem signed by CAS laid in, \$25. The prices are per copy, postpaid anywhere, net to all, from Roy A. Squires, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California.

There are 33 poems, 48 pages, set and printed by hand. Mr. Squires sent us a copy of the less expensive edition, and it is a very handsome production indeed. Those who are familiar with Smith’s poetry will find here the same quality that they found in his earlier collections, and in the pages of *Weird Tales*.

Hungary's Female Vampire

by Dean Lipton

This is not another tale of the kinfolk of Dracula, those animated corpses which arise when the direct radiations of the sun are not playing on their particular part of the planet, and go forth seeking fresh human blood for sustenance. There is another type of vampire, known to psychopathology, of which Countess Elizabeth Bathory is not the only example. Her case, however, is a well-attested one.

DARKNESS HAD settled over the gloomy, forested estates of Countess Elizabeth Bathory in northern Hungary one wintry night in 1600. A young nobleman just back from the wars stopped at the edge of her land and turned back. Although he needed shelter against the cruel winds and he had proved his courage in combat a dozen times over, there was no power

in the world which could have made him seek shelter behind the grim stone walls on the other side of the woods.

As he crouched beneath a tree attempting to wrest what protection he could from its leafless limbs and barren trunk, a wild, terrified feminine scream rang out across the empty space. Then it was followed by the fiendish, gleeful

laughter of several women mixed with the insane howls of a man. The young man crossed himself and started to run fearfully, hoping that the cries would be drowned out by the wind.

In the whole history of human brutality Elizabeth Bathory has no equal. She was a vampire who it is said killed six hundred virgins to satisfy her lust for blood. The cold court records of the trial of her retainers admit to sixty of these deaths by torture, and it is probable that these admissions were only a drop in the bucket. Elizabeth claimed to be a witch, and she was a practitioner of the more odious forms of witchcraft. She was a worshiper of cats and said that she had an army of them ready to obey her commands. She composed chants and rites for the destruction of her enemies and for her own protection. She organized a "coven of witches" as her followers and on warm summer nights met with them in the dark secrecy of the most gloomy part of Hungary's forests.

ELIZABETH BATHORY was not only one of the most beautiful women who ever lived but the daughter of one of Europe's greatest noblemen. The Bathory family owned vast estates in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, where many of the

early legends about vampires and werewolves first originated, and members of her family were without exception famous and wealthy. One of her close relatives was Prince of Transylvania, and she had an uncle who became King of Poland. The prime minister to the King of Hungary during most of her adult life was her first cousin whom she cordially hated. The Bathory family produced sheriffs, governors, judges, and even a cardinal and a couple of bishops.

Like many of the Central European nobility whose blood had been mixed with Attila's Huns, the Bathorys were hard, cruel, and barbaric. By the time Elizabeth was born, sometime around 1560, the family had become completely decadent and was rife with homosexuality, sadism, and devil worship. Elizabeth's brother was what today's papers would call a sex fiend, and except for his powerful family, would have been executed a number of times. She herself was initiated into the fine art of witchcraft and black magic before she was in her teens by an uncle who was a devil worshiper. She had an aunt whom she loved even more than she did her parents. This aunt was an infamous lesbian. Every contemporary account of Elizabeth Bathory is smothered in heavy overtones

of devil worship, sadism, and lesbianism.

It was the custom of the Bathorys to marry off the girl members of their family early. Elizabeth was only fifteen when she married Count Nadasdy who came from a family whose blood was only a little less blue than that of the Bathorys. Her father, who seems to have been one of the few likeable members of this unpleasant family, must have looked at his daughter with parental pride as she stood before the altar. Elizabeth had the figure of a grown woman, and her lovely black hair, which fell in curls to her waist, was matched by the amber color of her eyes. Her high cheekbones and slightly-slanted eyes only served to increase her strange beauty.

But, if the old Count could have seen into the future, he might have taken his razor-sharp hunting knife and cut his daughter's throat. However, even at fifteen, Elizabeth Bathory was self-willed and arrogant. Though married, she refused to change her name. When her husband became insistent and pointed out that Nadasdy was as old and good a name as Bathory, she drew herself up proudly and announced: "As I was born a Bathory, I shall live as a Bathory, and when I die I shall die

as one." This prophecy turned out to be all-too-true.

The twenty-one-year-old Count Nadasdy shrugged disdainfully. He was more interested in fighting in the dozens of little brush-fire wars that plagued Central Europe at the time than he was in his young wife anyway, and would eventually acquire a reputation as unenviable as hers as a leader of mercenary soldiers who never gave quarter, killing the wounded and civilians with the same lack of conscience that Elizabeth displayed in the torture chambers of her castles.

For several years this strange pair lived in connubial bliss — probably because they saw very little of each other. Nadasdy was away to the wars, and Elizabeth tried to play the part of a great lady. It is doubtful if Elizabeth saw the Count more than once or twice a year during this period. Nadasdy's reputation was growing, but Elizabeth had not yet acquired hers. True, neighboring nobles and the peasants saw that she had a penchant for punishing and whipping her servant girls; but this was common enough among the Hungarian nobility to be accepted as a matter of course.

Then when Elizabeth was twenty-six or twenty-seven, the first breath of scandal reached out and touched her. Count Nadasdy was off fighting a war

against the Serbs when a young man visited the Nadasdy estate. He and Elizabeth became inseparable companions, despite the fact that he was several years younger than she was. The superstitious peasants immediately started whispering that he was a vampire. After all, this young man had all of the ear-marks that a vampire was supposed to have: He was tall and dressed always in black; the color of his skin was a palid white, and his eyes were sharp and black; his teeth seemed sharper than a normal man's. The peasants started keeping their families in at night, bolting the doors to their huts, and piling heavy logs against them.

BUT, IF THE YOUNG man were a vampire, his desire for blood had been sated before he had appeared because in spite of their fears there is no record of a peasant having his blood sucked during the young man's stay. Then one bright morning, Elizabeth's retainers awoke to find that she and the young man had left during the night. Immediately they started whispering about the poor Countess Bathory and the horrible vampire that she had run off with. But their concern should have been for the young man.

Months went by, and Count Nadasdy returned. In his absence he had grown a huge,

black beard which covered his face and made him look, some said, more like a bear than a man. He accepted his wife's elopement philosophically and turned for his pleasures to a string of peasant girls. Then one day Elizabeth returned. She seemed none the worst for her experiences with the "vampire," but the superstitious peasants believed that they could still see traces of wet blood on her lips as she moved her tongue feverishly back and forth over them. Anyway, no one saw or ever heard of the young man again.

Apparently Count Nadasdy wasn't the jealous type. He accepted Elizabeth back without so much as a reproachful word, but he had another complaint. They had been married for more than ten years and there were still no children. True, he was home only infrequently, but still he had bedded the woman often enough for there to have been at least one heir. He called Elizabeth to him and told her that he had married a woman and not a barren witch. If she were as good at witchcraft as she often boasted to him that she was, she had better come up with a chant which would produce a son. For once, Elizabeth, in her own fashion, played the part of a dutiful wife. She hurried to the darkest part of the woods, stripped her clothes off, and chanted. In

four years, she produced four children for the Count, three sons and a daughter. The only thing is that historians have never been quite sure that Count Nadasdy was their father.

THE ONLY ONE of Elizabeth's retainers at this time who seemed to share her desires to practice witchcraft and sadism was her old nurse, Ilona Joo. She was a gaunt old hag, who looked the way a witch was supposed to look. She was the one who apparently encouraged Elizabeth to forget about such prosaic forms of torture as whipping and beating, and to undertake the kinds of torture which depended upon the use of molten wax, knives, and fire. Eventually, Elizabeth's skill would make the Marquis de Sade look like a piker.

Living with Elizabeth at the time was her old mother-in-law, a woman as different from Elizabeth as day is from night. She tried to reason with her daughter-in-law and finding it of no avail, told her son. The Count wasn't averse to the occasional use of the lash, but even he had to admit that this was carrying things too far; the King of Hungary had just hanged a couple of lesser nobles for practices far less vicious. So he told his wife to forget about fire and knives, return to the use of the whip,

and to get rid of the old hag, Ilona Joo, who he had always disliked intensely, anyway. These were the last orders he gave to Elizabeth or to anyone else.

Suddenly, and in the prime of life, Count Nadasdy died. No one is quite sure what caused his death; in those days, there was no such thing as an autopsy. The superstitious said that the Countess had killed him by smearing the blood of a black hen on his shirt. The worldly nobles talked about poison, and there were even some naive ones who said that he had died a natural death.

THE FIRST THING Elizabeth did thereafter was to send her mother-in-law packing. The next thing she did was to fire all her retainers except Ilona Joo and hire new ones closer to her own desires. She managed to collect a crew of monsters seldom seen outside the padded cells occupied by homicidal maniacs. They included her torturer-in-chief, Johannes Ujvary; a notorious sorcerer named Thorko; and two witches who had already earned unpleasant reputations — Dorottya Szentes and Darvula.

However, for a year or two everything went along much as it had been before. Elizabeth stuck to torturing her unfortunate servant girls. Then an accident occurred which made it

necessary for her to have an unlimited supply of girls. Elizabeth was vain about her beauty and she feared constantly that it was vanishing with age. Actually, it was a needless worry; if anything, she was more beautiful at forty than she had been at eighteen.

Each day, her maid spent hours giving her one beautifying treatment after another. One day, while the maid was combing Elizabeth's long, black hair, she accidentally yanked it. Elizabeth struck her hard across the face, and the blood from her smashed lips and nose covered the palm of Elizabeth's hand. Elizabeth first drew her tongue across her blood-smeared palm and a look of insatiable joy crossed her face. Then she smoothed the remaining blood back and forth over her skin with the tips of her fingers. It seemed to her that where the blood had been the skin was more beautiful than before. She had discovered the fountain of youth — bathing in the blood of virgins.

While the poor maid cowered in a corner of the room, Elizabeth called Thorko and Johannes Ujavary to her. At her orders, they tore the girl's clothes off and drained the blood from her body into a vat, and Elizabeth took off her clothes and covered herself with the red liquid. Elizabeth rose from her bath refreshed

and in her eyes, more beautiful than she had ever been. She then sent her retainers into the fields to recruit young girls. They did this at first by promising them jobs in the castle. But soon they were unable to get any girls by subterfuge, and so they resorted to kidnapping them. No one has ever been able to make an accurate estimate as to how many innocent girls vanished because of Elizabeth Bathory's insatiable lust for blood.

TO THIS DAY, we don't know why the authorities did not take action. We do know that they had some idea of what was going on, because in the early part of 1600 the ugly rumors turned into hard, even uglier facts. One of Elizabeth's captives managed to escape more dead than alive, and she let the entire country in on what was going on before she died. She told how hundreds of girls were kept in stalls in the castle's dungeons and cellars. They were well-fed and well-treated until their turn came to be tortured and have their veins pierced so their blood might be drained away. She even told of Elizabeth's favorite method of reviving a victim who had fainted because she could no longer stand the torture. Elizabeth would have one of her retainers stick burning pieces of paper between the

girl's bare toes; this was guaranteed to bring her to unless she were dead.

It may have been that her family was too powerful for ordinary people to buck, although it is known that among her worst enemies was her first cousin — the prime minister — Another cousin, Count Gyorgy Thurzo, was governor of the province in which she lived. It may have been that the powerful nobles did not see why they should move against one of their own because of a handful of unknown peasant girls. But though it sounds strange today, the most logical reason seems to have been the fear of her power as a witch which she played on and caused to be circulated all over Hungary.

Even the worldly nobles — who, for the most part, didn't believe in this mumbo-jumbo — shuddered when chants such as this one were broadcast over the land by Elizabeth Bathory:

"Isten, help me! Isten, help me! You little cloud, help me too! Give health, protection, and long life to Elizabeth. You little cloud, when I am in danger, send ninety-nine cats! I order you to do so because you are supreme commander of the cats. Give orders to the cats. Tell the cats to gather from wherever they be, on mountains, water, rivers, seas. Order ninety-nine cats to come with speed and bite

the heart of King Matthias. Order them to bite the heart of Moses Cziraky, and to bite also the heart of Red Megyeri. And keep Elizabeth safe from harm."

THE MINOR police officials whom she named in her chants feared her like a plague. As for the peasants, they would have rather faced any other evil than Elizabeth Bathory and her retinue of vampires, werewolves, and witches. So for ten years no one moved against her.

Then, in 1610, she made a mistake which was to prove fatal. In a small village bordering her estate there lived a simple, country priest whose name unfortunately has been lost to history. Elizabeth's retainers kidnapped the daughter of one of this priest's parishioners. The priest let out a howl of anger which carried from one end of Hungary to the other. It finally reached the King. King Matthias ordered an investigation, and when the nature of some of Elizabeth's chants were explained to him, he reacted violently and called his prime minister to him. "Your cousin," the King said bluntly, "is guilty not only of being a murderous fiend but of treason."

So on December 30, 1610, just when Elizabeth and her followers were in the midst of a wild New Year's Eve orgy, a raiding party of soldiers and local police descended on her castle. The party was led by cousin Count

Gyorgy Thurzo, governor of the province, who had been given to understand by the King that he wanted the matter cleaned up once and for all. Elizabeth's retainers were carted off to jail, and she was placed under virtual house arrest.

They were all placed on trial for their lives, and it was one of the largest and most important trials held in Hungary up to that time. It took the entire months of January and February, 1611, to hear all of the evidence. The presiding judge was Theodosius Syrmiensis de Szulo, chief justice of the Royal Supreme Court, and he was assisted by twenty associate judges. All the defendants except Elizabeth pleaded guilty. Elizabeth refused to enter plea and sulked in her castle. King Matthias had instructed the court to ignore all of the mumbo jumbo about witchcraft and vampires and to treat the case as they would any other murder trial.

ALL THE defendants were found guilty of murder; they were all beheaded except Elizabeth, Ilona Joo, and Dorttya Szentes. The two old women were tortured and then burned alive, even though the charges against them were murder and not witchcraft, and did not call for such a penalty.

A tug-of-war took place as to what should be done to Elizabeth Bathory. Because of the

prominence of her family, she was not sentenced by the court, even though found guilty. Her family — even those who despised her for the disgrace that she had brought to their name — rallied to her defense. At first, King Matthias insisted that she be put to death with the others; finally he gave in to the pressure of his prime minister and the other powerful nobles.

No sentence was ever passed against Elizabeth Bathory, but she was condemned nonetheless to what amounted to virtual solitary confinement for the rest of her life. King Matthias sent soldiers and workmen to her castle. They forced her into a small room and sealed the room so no one could enter or leave, leaving only a small slit so that food and water could be passed in and a few small air-holes at the top of the room.

There were some who thought that Elizabeth would turn into a bat and fly out of one of the small air holes, or use her knowledge of witchcraft to sail through the solid stone walls of the room. But she was never quite able to make it. In four years, she turned into an old woman, and in 1614 when one of the guards looked through the slit in the wall Elizabeth Bathory, the vampire who had terrorized an entire country, was lying face down on the floor, dead.

A Tough Tussle

by Ambrose Bierce

The stories in the collection, "Can Such Things Be?", from which this tale is drawn, turn on the "humor of horror," as Clifton Fadiman puts it. There is an ever-present sardonic grin on Bierce's face. Nothing in "A Tough Tussle" is funny, yet frantic laughter lurks just around the corner at all times . . .

ONE NIGHT IN the autumn of 1861 a man sat alone in the heart of a forest in western Virginia. The region was one of the wildest on the continent — the Cheat Mountain country. There was no lack of people close at hand, however; within a mile of where the man sat was the now silent camp of a whole Federal brigade. Somewhere

about — it might be still nearer — was a force of the enemy, the numbers unknown. It was this uncertainty as to its numbers and position that accounted for the man's presence in that lonely spot; he was a young officer of a Federal infantry regiment and his business there was to guard his sleeping comrades in the camp

against a surprise. He was in command of a detachment of men constituting a picket-guard. These men he had stationed just at nightfall in an irregular line, determined by the nature of the ground, several hundred yards in front of where he now sat. The line ran through the forest, among the rocks and laurel thickets, the men fifteen or twenty paces apart, all in concealment and under injunction of strict silence and unremitting vigilance. In four hours, if nothing occurred, they would be relieved by a fresh detachment from the reserve now resting in care of its captain some distance away to the left and rear. Before stationing his men the young officer of whom we are writing had pointed out to his two sergeants the spot at which he would be found if it should be necessary to consult him, or if his presence at the front line should be required.

It was a quiet enough spot — the fork of an old wood-road, on the two branches of which, prolonging themselves deviously forward in the dim moonlight, the sergeants were themselves stationed, a few paces in rear of the line. If driven sharply back by a sudden onset of the enemy — and pickets are not expected to make a stand after firing — the men would come into the converging roads and naturally following them to

their point of intersection could be rallied and "formed." In his small way the author of these dispositions was something of a strategist; if Napoleon had planned as intelligently at Waterloo he would have won that memorable battle and been overthrown later.

Second-Lieutenant Brainerd Byring was a brave and efficient officer, young and comparatively inexperienced as he was in the business of killing his fellow-men. He had enlisted in the very first days of the war as a private, with no military knowledge whatever, had been made first-sergeant of his company on account of his education and engaging manner, and had been lucky enough to lose his captain by a Confederate bullet; in the resulting promotions he had gained a commission. He had been in several engagements, such as they were — at Philippi, Rich. Mountain, Carrick's Ford and Greenbrier — and had borne himself with such gallantry as not to attract the attention of his superior officers. The exhilaration of battle was agreeable to him, but the sight of the dead, with their clay faces, blank eyes and stiff bodies, which when not unnaturally shrunken were unnaturally swollen, had always intolerably affected him. He felt toward them a kind of reasonless antipathy that was something more than the physical

and spiritual repugnance common to us all. Doubtless this feeling was due to his unusually acute sensibilities — his keen sense of the beautiful, which these hideous things outraged. Whatever may have been the cause, he could not look upon a dead body without a loathing which had in it an element of resentment. What others have respected as the dignity of death had to him no existence — was altogether unthinkable. Death was a thing to be hated. It was not picturesque, it had no tender and solemn side — a dismal thing, hideous in all its manifestations and suggestions. Lieutenant Byring was a braver man than anybody knew, for nobody knew his horror of that which he was ever ready to incur.

HAVING POSTED his men, instructed his sergeants and retired to his station, he seated himself on a log, and with senses all alert began his vigil. For greater ease he loosened his sword-belt and taking his heavy revolver from his holster laid it on the log beside him. He felt very comfortable, though he hardly gave the fact a thought, so intently did he listen for any sound from the front which might have a menacing significance — a shout, a shot, or the footfall of one of his sergeants coming to apprise him of something worth knowing. From the vast, invisible ocean of moon-

light overhead fell, here and there, a slender, broken stream that seemed to splash against the intercepting branches and trickle to earth, forming small white pools among the clumps of laurel. But these leaks were few and served only to accentuate the blackness of his environment, which his imagination found it easy to people with all manner of unfamiliar shapes, menacing, uncanny, or merely grotesque.

He to whom the portentous conspiracy of night and solitude and silence in the heart of a great forest is not an unknown experience needs not to be told what another world it all is — how even the most commonplace and familiar objects take on another character. The trees group themselves differently; they draw closer together, as if in fear. The very silence has another quality than the silence of the day. And it is full of half-heard whispers — whispers that startle — ghosts of sounds long dead. There are living sounds, too, such as are never heard under other conditions: notes of strange night-birds, the cries of small animals in sudden encounters with stealthy foes or in their dreams, a rustling in the dead leaves — it may be the leap of a wood-rat, it may be the footfall of a panther. What caused the breaking of that twig? — what the low, alarmed twittering in that bushful of

birds? There are sounds without a name, forms without substance, translations in space of objects which have not been seen to move, movements wherein nothing is observed to change its place. Ah, children of the sunlight and the gaslight, how little you know of the world in which you live!

Surrounded at a little distance by armed and watchful friends, Byring felt utterly alone. Yielding himself to the solemn and mysterious spirit of the time and place, he had forgotten the nature of his connection with the visible and audible aspects and phases of the night. The forest was boundless; men and the habitations of men did not exist. The universe was one primeval mystery of darkness, without form and void, himself the sole, dumb questioner of its eternal secret. Absorbed in thoughts born of this mood, he suffered the time to slip away unnoticed. Meantime the infrequent patches of white light lying amongst the tree-trunks had undergone changes of size, form and place. In one of them near by, just at the roadside, his eye fell upon an object that he had not previously observed. It was almost before his face as he sat; he could see that it was a human figure. Instinctively he adjusted the clasp of his sword-belt and laid hold of his pistol — again

he was in a world of war, by occupation an assassin.

THE FIGURE DID not move. Rising, pistol in hand, he approached. The figure lay upon its back, its upper part in shadow, but standing above it and looking down upon the face, he saw that it was a dead body. He shuddered and turned from it with a feeling of sickness and disgust, resumed his seat upon the log, and forgetting military prudence struck a match and lit a cigar. In the sudden blackness that followed the extinction of the flame he felt a sense of relief; he could no longer see the object of his aversion. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes set in that direction until it appeared again with growing distinctness. It seemed to have moved a trifle nearer.

"Damn the thing!" he muttered. "What does it want?"

It did not appear to be in need of anything but a soul.

Byring turned away his eyes and began humming a tune, but he broke off in the middle of a bar and looked at the dead body. Its presence annoyed him, though he could hardly have had a quieter neighbor. He was conscious, too, of a vague, indefinable feeling that was new to him. It was not fear, but rather a sense of the supernatural — in which he did not at all believe.

"I have inherited it," he said to himself. "I suppose it will require a thousand ages — perhaps ten thousand — for humanity to outgrow this feeling. Where and when did it originate? Away back, probably, in what is called the cradle of the human race — the plains of Central Asia. What we inherit as a superstition our barbarous ancestors must have held as a reasonable conviction. Doubtless they believed themselves justified by facts whose nature we cannot even conjecture in thinking a dead body a malign thing endowed with some strange power of mischief, with perhaps a will and a purpose to exert it. Possibly they had some awful form of religion of which that was one of the chief doctrines, sedulously taught by their priesthood, as ours teach the immortality of the soul. As the Aryans moved slowly on, to and through the Caucasus passes, and spread over Europe, new conditions of life must have resulted in the formulation of new religions. The old belief in the malevolence of the dead body was lost from the creeds and even perished from tradition, but it left its heritage of terror, which is transmitted from generation to generation — is as much a part of us as are our blood and bones."

IN FOLLOWING out his thought, he had forgotten

that which suggested it; but now his eye fell again upon the corpse. The shadow had now altogether uncovered it. He saw the sharp profile, the chin in the air, the whole face, ghastly white in the moonlight. The clothing was gray, the uniform of a Confederate soldier. The coat and waistcoat, unbuttoned, had fallen away on each side, exposing the white shirt. The chest seemed unnaturally prominent, but the abdomen had sunk in, leaving a sharp projection at the line of the lower ribs. The arms were extended, the left knee was thrust upward. The whole posture impressed Byring as having been studied with a view to the horrible.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "He was an actor — he knows how to be dead."

He drew away his eyes, directing them resolutely along one of the roads leading to the front, and resumed his philosophizing where he had left off.

"It may be that our Central Asian ancestors had not the custom of burial. In that case it is easy to understand their fear of the dead, who really were a menace and an evil. They bred pestilences. Children were taught to avoid the places where they lay, and to run away if by inadvertence they came near a corpse. I think, indeed, I'd better go away from this chap."

He half rose to do so, then

remembered that he had told his men in front and the officer in the rear who was to relieve him that he could at any time be found at that spot. It was a matter of pride, too. If he abandoned his post he feared they would think he feared the corpse. He was no coward and he was unwilling to incur anybody's ridicule. So he again seated himself, and to prove his courage looked boldly at the body. The right arm — the one farthest from him — was now in shadow. He could barely see the hand which, he had before observed, lay at the root of a clump of laurel. There had been no change, a fact which gave him a certain comfort, he could not have said why. He did not at once remove his eyes; that which we do not wish to see has a strange fascination, sometimes irresistible. Of the woman who covers her eyes with her hands and looks between the fingers let it be said that the wits have dealt with her not altogether justly.

BYRING SUDDENLY became conscious of a pain in his right hand. He withdrew his eyes from his enemy and looked at it. He was grasping the hilt of his drawn sword so tightly that it hurt him. He observed, too, that he was leaning forward in a strained attitude — crouching like a gladiator ready to spring at the throat of

an antagonist. His teeth were clenched and he was breathing hard. This matter was soon set right, and as his muscles relaxed and he drew a long breath he felt keenly enough the ludicrousness of the incident. It affected him to laughter. Heavens! what sound was that? what mindless devil was uttering an unholy glee in mockery of human merriment? He sprang to his feet and looked about him, not recognizing his own laugh.

He could no longer conceal from himself the horrible fact of his cowardice; he was thoroughly frightened! He would have run from the spot, but his legs refused their office; they gave way beneath him and he sat again upon the log, violently trembling. His face was wet, his whole body bathed in a chill perspiration. He could not even cry out. Distinctly he heard behind him a stealthy tread, as of some wild animal, and dared not look over his shoulder. Had the soulless living joined forces with the soulless dead? — was it an animal? Ah, if he could but be assured of that! But by no effort of will could he now unfix his gaze from the face of the dead man.

I repeat that Lieutenant Byring was a brave and intelligent man. But what would you have? Shall a man cope, single-handed, with so monstrous an alliance as that of night and sol-

itude and silence and the dead — while an incalculable host of his own ancestors shriek into the ear of his spirit their coward counsel, sing their doleful death-songs in his heart, and disarm his very blood of all its iron? The odds are too great — courage was not made for so rough use as that.

One sole conviction now had the man in possession: that the body had moved. It lay nearer to the edge of its plot of light — there could be no doubt of it. It had also moved its arms, for, look, they are both in the shadow! A breath of cold air struck Byring full in the face; the boughs of trees above him stirred and moaned. A strongly defined shadow passed across the face of the dead, left it luminous, passed back upon it and left it half obscured. The horrible thing was visibly moving! At that moment a single shot rang out upon the picket-line — a lonelier and louder, though more distant, shot than ever had been heard by mortal ear! It broke the spell of that enchanted man; it slew the silence and the solitude, dispersed the hindering host from Central Asia and released his modern manhood. With a cry like that of some great bird pouncing upon its prey he sprang forward, hot-hearted for action!

SHOT AFTER SHOT now came from the front. There

were shoutings and confusion, hoof-beats and desultory cheers. Away to the rear, in the sleeping camp, were a singing of bugles and grumble of drums. Pushing through the thickets on either side the roads came the Federal pickets, in full retreat, firing backward at random as they ran. A straggling group that had followed back one of the roads, as instructed, suddenly sprang away into the bushes as half a hundred horsemen thundered by them, striking wildly with their sabres as they passed. At headlong speed these mounted madmen shot past the spot where Byring had sat, and vanished round an angle of the road, shouting and firing their pistols. A moment later there was a roar of musketry, followed by dropping shots — they had encountered the reserve-guard in line; and back they came in dire confusion, with here and there an empty saddle and many a maddened horse, bullet-stung, snorting and plunging with pain. It was all over — “an affair of out-posts.”

The line was re-established with fresh men, the roll called, the stragglers were re-formed. The Federal commander with a part of his staff, imperfectly clad, appeared upon the scene, asked a few questions, looked exceedingly wise and retired. After standing at arms for an hour the brigade in camp

"swore a prayer or two" and went to bed.

EARLY THE NEXT morning a fatigue-party, commanded by a captain and accompanied by a surgeon, searched the ground for dead and wounded. At the fork of the road, a little to one side, they found two bodies lying close together — that of a Federal officer and that of a Confederate private. The officer had died of a sword-thrust through the heart, but not, apparently, until he had inflicted upon his enemy no fewer than five dreadful wounds. The dead officer lay on his face in a pool of blood, the weapon still in his breast. They turned him on his back and the surgeon removed it.

"Gad!" said the captain — "It is Byring!" — adding, with a glance at the other, "They had a tough tussle."

The surgeon was examining the sword. It was that of a line officer of the Federal infantry — exactly like the one worn by the captain. It was, in fact, Byring's own. The only other weapon discovered was an undischarged revolver in the dead officer's belt.

The surgeon laid down the sword and approached the other body. It was frightfully gashed and stabbed, but there was no blood. He took hold of the left foot and tried to straighten the leg. In the effort the body was displaced. The dead do not wish to be moved — it protested with a faint, sickening odor. Where it had lain were a few maggots, manifesting an imbecile activity. —

The surgeon looked at the captain. The captain looked at the surgeon.



Doorslammer

by Donald A. Wollheim

A quiet, disturbing tale which may make you wonder about familiar sounds heard at untoward times. The author regrets that this account is factually based only up to a point. It would be amusing to learn that the offices of a well-known publisher were haunted . . .

FROM SOMEWHERE down the darkened hall a door slammed.

I looked up from my papers, looked at Mr. Wilkins questioningly. It was ten thirty at night and I had supposed we were alone in the office, probably alone in the whole gigantic office building.

"The cleaning woman come back?" I queried. She had been in an hour ago, dusting and mopping and emptying the waste baskets. It was a disturbance and a distraction. We wanted to get the books straightened out and we needed peace and quiet to do it.

Wilkins shook his head. "It

was nothing. Let's get on with this."

I frowned, annoyed, went back to my ledgers. I finished four more pages, saw that the work was finished on this book. It wasn't going to be such a long job at that. I'd figured on being at the office until maybe one in the morning. I leaned back, looked up.

Wilkins looked up just then, caught my eye, smiled a bit. I saw he'd probably realized just how close we were to being through.

"I'm done with this one," I said. "Going to stretch my legs a bit." He watched me, said nothing. I got up, walked over to the water cooler at the door, took a drink, looked out into the dark corridor leading towards the editorial offices. I couldn't see what door had slammed. They were all shut, all the little cubbyholes at the far end, the ones with the view of the river from twenty stories up, the best offices reserved for the sensitive souls in Editorial — with the big brains and the lowest salaries.

I walked down the hall towards that end. It was dark and deserted, and there were no lights behind the chilled glass windows of the doors. It's eerie in an office building after hours, darned eerie. I came back. Wilkins had finished his ledger, was leaning back, lighting a cigarette.

"Nobody there," I said. "But somebody slammed a door before I heard it. And there's no drafts."

He nodded soberly. "I know. I heard it too. Often hear it late at night like this. It's nobody. Only Alice."

"Alice?" I asked. "Thought you said we were alone. Is Alice the cleaning woman's name?"

He shook his head. "No, not Mrs. Flaherty. Just Alice . . . You remember."

I sat down. "Who're you kidding? I don't remember any Alice."

WILKINS LOOKED at me, took his cigarette out of his mouth. "Oh, that's right. You never knew her. You came after her time. Well . . . it's Alice, anyway. Alice Kingsley, I think was her name. Alice C. Kingsley. Mrs."

"So?" I said. "So this Alice is working here tonight. Why doesn't she come in and say hello? One of those stuck-up editors?"

"Alice isn't working here tonight," said Wilkins mildly. "She hasn't been working here for a couple of years. Not here. Not nowhere."

"So who are you talking about?" I asked, beginning to get a little piqued. "First you say Alice, then no — so what Alice is here now?"

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't know for sure. We

just think it's Alice. I mean the Kingsley girl. She was a knockout too. A real looker."

For a moment he looked dreamy, as if thinking of some girl he'd maybe had an infatuation for. I could have knocked him on the head. "What are you handing me? Make sense, man. You're a hell of an accountant, sitting there like a goof dreaming of some girl."

He wasn't offended. "Yeah, I guess so. But Alice got us all that way. She was . . . well, you just couldn't look at her without thinking of blue skies and green fields, of Spring mornings and college campuses. She didn't belong in a city office. She was . . . well, she looked like a kid fresh from some rah-rah field."

"Uh huh," I said. "Does your wife know about the way you feel about this chick?"

"Ahh," he shook his head, "you won't believe it, but she wouldn't mind. Alice was that way. She was out of this world — I mean the big-city world. The women didn't seem to object to her. Somehow she just didn't seem to compete. She was in love, you see, and offered no rivalry. She was also may, nuts."

"Boy, what a picture you're building up. Sweet innocence, a knockout, lovely, but nuts. Come down to Earth, man." I sat down myself, glanced out at the dark corridor back over my shoulder.

He went on again, this time paying no attention to me, just talking.

"Alice was hired as an assistant editor to the short story department. She was fresh from college, somewhere in the Midwest, and she never lost that look. You don't find it often. She had the blackest hair and the fairest skin, and the brightest, shiniest eyes you ever saw.

"She was like a kid in many ways. Never seemed to have any mind for other folks. She was a door slammer. I remember a big fight she had the first week she was here. Slammed the door going out of Miss Burnside's office and boy, did that queen bee get sore. You know what a touchy old bat the boss' secretary is. You should have heard her give Alice the mouth. And Alice didn't answer back. Just looked at her like a child of twelve would look, sort of wide-eyed and wondering what kind of curious animal this was. Afterwards, Alice only remarked that Miss Burnside must be crazy.

"Fact is, we got to thinking that it wasn't Burnsy that was cracked. Alice just never learned some things. She'd step on people's toes and expect them to pardon her like they'd forgive a pretty brat. It took a while for us to learn. She never stopped slamming doors. Got so we all knew when she was around.

"YOU SHOULD HAVE seen the fellows try to date up Alice. Not one of them got to first base. She just seemed so darned innocent and starry that nothing impressed her. Later, we found out why. She was married, you see. Still loved her husband. He was some fellow she'd met in college, married there.

"We envied him until we found out that one day he'd run off, just skipped out, vanished. That was the day Alice graduated. She came home with her diploma, in that college town to the boarding house they were living in, and he'd gone. Left no notice, just went. Quit.

"Alice went home to her folks — I think they're Des Moines people — threw a wingding, was laid up, left town, came to New York, got a job. Here. She was brilliant, but there was always something . . .

"It's hard to explain to a fellow who never saw her. You'd be amazed at what she could get away with. None of her bosses — the men that is — could get mad at her. She did her work too well for that, yet she never seemed to be present in spirit. I think they were afraid she'd quit if they pressed her too hard to learn some manners. Having her around was a pleasure — just to see that Springlike air. You

don't find it around the city, you just don't.

"But there was something else, though. I remember once going down in the elevator with her, and with Joe Simpkins, her boss, the short story editor, you know. She never said goodnight to us, just brushed past and walked off down the street, her brow a little puzzled as if wondering herself what she was doing here away from the green fields. Joe and I walked a block watching her, and then Joe turned to me and said, 'You know, I keep saying to myself that Alice is as nutty as fruit cake. I keep thinking it every once in a while. It sort of bothers me.'

"I knew what he meant, too. Exactly what he meant. Anyways, Alice was with the firm about six months and everybody loved her and everybody knew when you heard a door slam, it was just Alice going somewhere.

"Miss Burnside never forgave her. They had another fight one afternoon and Burnsy gave it to her good. Told her she should wake up and stop acting like a spoiled brat. Burnsy said something else, too. Said she could understand how her husband would walk out on her."

Wilkins stopped, frowned to himself in thought, lit another cigarette. "Alice took it from her without really listening, her usual trick. But the next day it

seemed to bother her, because she actually took to closing doors gently. It amazed us all.

"And then one morning, about eleven, the door slammed — violently. Alice was off again, we thought, but we didn't know the whole of it.

"Joe Simpkins told us at lunchtime. He said Alice was very upset. It seems she'd read a manuscript that morning, some short story in the mail unsolicited pile. Something about a guy that fell in love only to find a mirage. Typical college young-love sort of yarn. We saw afterwards who wrote it. Some fellow in California. Last name was Kingsley.

"Alice didn't do much work that afternoon. Just seemed to forget every now and then and sort of visit. She'd drop in on the other readers, sort of stand around vacantly, just sort of dreamy, then breeze out, slamming the door behind her. We were getting real sore after an afternoon of that and Joe swore if she didn't stop it, he'd have to do something. Maybe get rid of her, fire her. Good as she was, he couldn't have people being disrupted.

"He didn't have to fire her though. The door of her own office slammed around four o'clock. When it was half past five and the other girls were leaving, someone looked in and her office was empty and the window open.

"Yeah, it was in the papers. There was quite a funeral, too. She had quite a mob of young fellows there. Nobody ever suspected them, but I think they couldn't help themselves. She was a sort of dream, a dream of sun and fleecy white clouds such as you somehow don't get with city girls. I didn't go myself. They kept the coffin closed.

"Anyway, that was two years ago. Alice made an impression on people that lasted. Nobody that knew her can ever quite get over her. And maybe things feel the same way. We got door trouble in this office, late at night or on quiet afternoons. Nobody pays any attention to it any more."

I looked at him, thinking to myself that he was really going in the deep end. You wouldn't believe he could be such a matter-of-fact, adding and subtracting machine accountant. There was something in his eyes, something perplexed, lit up and yet maybe a little pained.

"Well, enough of this. Let's get this work cleaned up. I want to get home tonight." Wilkins shoved another ledger at me, opened up the other remaining one, and we bent over our tasks again.

Somewhere down the hall a door slammed. I looked up, caught Wilkins' eye. He shrugged.

"It's nothing. Just Alice."

The Electric Chair

by George Waight

Whether the tale of the German captain and the British spies in the opening of this story is true or fictitious, we cannot say. But we can say that the basic principle is all too true . . .

*"Tis an awkward thing to play
with souls
And matter enough to save one's
own."*

-Browning.

IT ALL BEGAN in a conversation that took place one afternoon in the smoking room of the Athenæum Club, of which Dr. Ainsworth was a member.

The talk had turned on the subject of death and the fear of death. Mortimer, the actor, had given it as his opinion that it is not death which men fear so much as the uncertainty of what is beyond. Almost inevitably he

quoted "Hamlet" in support of his contention.

Hamilton, the Harley Street brain specialist, joined the discussion at this point.

"If that is true," he remarked thoughtfully, "it should follow that if a man were confronted with a mystery stranger even than the mystery of death, he would choose death rather than face the greater mystery. I doubt it. I doubt it very much."

"By Jove, yes!" Wordsworth, the soldier and celebrated explorer, remarked suddenly. "That reminds me of a story I read somewhere during the war.

Some German captain had captured a number of British spies, and instead of shooting them outright, he gave each of them a chance. For half an hour he put them, separately, of course, into a room out of which two doors led. He told them that one door led straight to the waiting firing party, but where the other door led he refused to tell them. Each man was given his choice. This German fellow had the reputation of being a pretty cunning fiend, I remember."

"They chose the firing party, I fancy," Mortimer remarked *sotto voce*.

"Each man," Wordsworth continued quietly. "Each man guessed that something pretty grisly lay behind that other door — tortures, mutilation, hanging. Each man, as it came to his turn, chose the firing party. With that they knew exactly what they were in for."

Arthur Sinclair, the young author whose book, "The Slender Hope," it will be remembered, made such a sensation in the last year of the war for the keenness of its sensitive imagination, had so far taken no part in the discussion. Now he suddenly broke in, speaking with sharp conviction.

"But that's absurd!" he said. "Why, the other door might have led to freedom, for all they knew!"

"That's exactly where it did

lead," the soldier finished quietly. "I told you that the German was reputed to be a pretty considerable expert in frightfulness. You see, none of them had the courage (and they were brave men, too, or they couldn't have been spies in wartime) to face the horror of the unknown. They chose the death they knew."

For a time there was silence. Each of his hearers was interpreting the story in accordance with his own thought.

"I wonder, I wonder," Dr. Ainsworth muttered, half to himself. "I wonder."

2

SINCLAIR WAS TAKEN by surprise when Dr. Ainsworth invited him to dine at his house about a month later. He had never been able to determine whether the doctor objected to him personally, or whether the natural reluctance of a man of fixed habits to lose an efficient and charming housekeeper accounted for the doctor's strong hostility to Sinclair's engagement to his niece. As the date of their wedding approached, the scientist's opposition intensified rather than diminished, so that when he went out of his way to invite the young man to dinner, the latter surprisedly wondered whether this was to be construed as a flag of truce.

At any rate, on this occasion,

the doctor showed not the slightest sign of hostility. At dinner, seated with his guest on one side of him while Mildred, his niece, faced him at the other end of the table, he was affability itself.

After the port had gone round the table, Mildred left the two men with their cigars, with an admonition not to be too long before joining her in the drawing room.

When she had left the room, the doctor passed the decanter again to his guest and continued to engage him in close conversation. By the time that an inch and a half of white ash showed at the end of his cigar, he pushed back his chair and rose from the table.

"Before we join Mildred, I should like you to see one or two little things in my laboratory, which I believe may interest you," he remarked, and led the way upstairs, past the door of the drawing room, to the top floor of the house, which was given up entirely to his researches.

Sinclair had never entered the laboratory before. His first impression was a swift recollection of schoolboy days, when he had worked in a room that presented just such an unbroken array of bottles and balances and strange-looking instruments, except that here there seemed to be more of them. His attention was attracted by a line of

cases on the right of the room apparently containing a series of waxworks, of which he did not immediately appreciate the significance. It was as he was moving over to examine these that he first became aware of a strange sensation of dizziness stealing over him. The room darkened and he felt that he was about to fall. The voice of his host sounded for a moment as from an immense distance before it trailed off into nothingness.

3

SINCLAIR STIRRED slightly, and his eyes opened. Once more his brain was beginning to function dimly, and he had a vague sensation of being closed in. He made to move his hand and discovered that he could not. His head felt as if it were rigidly held in a vise.

Slowly, as consciousness came back to him, he became aware of his surroundings. He remembered entering the doctor's laboratory. Then the sudden blackness had come. He saw now that he was still in the laboratory. He supposed he had fainted. That no doubt accounted for the sensation of being bound. He became aware that he was sitting upright in a large, hard chair. He could not see the doctor.

Slowly, as if testing his faculties, he tried to turn his head.

He felt as if something was pressing his head down, and discovered he could not move it. A new dizziness swept over him. Visions of sudden paralysis flickered through his brain. With an effort he regained control of himself. At least he could move his eyes. That was something, anyway. At this point he caught sight of his hands, which were lying along the arms of his chair, and he discovered that iron bands encircled his wrists and that these bands were fastened by a chain to the arms of the chair. Utterly at a loss, he tried to move his feet, only to learn, after moving them about six inches, that they were similarly fastened.

He closed his eyes, attempting to shake off what he supposed must be the nightmare of a dream.

At that moment he heard a step. Opening his eyes again, he discovered that Dr. Ainsworth had come round in front of him and was watching him smilingly.

"Ah, conscious again, I see," Ainsworth remarked in a tone of satisfaction. "Quite comfortable, I trust?"

Sinclair made a motion to pass his hands over his eyes and was reminded again that his hands were fastened. He looked stupidly at the other man.

"What has happened?"

"A little experiment. Just a little experiment."

He turned away and came back with a mirror, which he held up before the younger man.

Sinclair looked, and saw his head crowned with a metal cap to which were attached strangling wires.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "I fainted, didn't I?"

The doctor laughed.

"Not exactly," he said. "No, not exactly. I'm afraid I must plead guilty to having put something into your coffee."

Sinclair would have shaken his head in bewilderment, but his head was secured, as he had noticed in the mirror, by a vise attached to the back of the chair.

"I don't understand," he repeated. "Please explain what has happened. Why am I fastened like this?"

The doctor had laid aside the mirror and now stood facing the young man in the chair. Behind him, long rows of labeled bottles and phials formed an appropriate background, together with instruments of which Sinclair could not guess the use.

The doctor's manner was now that of a lecturer addressing his class.

"I shall have to take your mind back some time," he began. "You will no doubt recall hearing that very interesting little story of a German captain and his captured spies, who were given the choice, you will

remember, of going to a known certain death or of meeting a fate the nature of which remained a mystery."

He paused. Sinclair had almost forgotten the incident, but he now recalled it.

"In that story, each of the victims chose to face the firing party. You, I remember," he continued in a tone of easy reminiscence, "were scornful of this and declared that they ought to have chosen the other door which might have led, as it actually did lead, to freedom. Personally, I keep an open mind as to the psychology of the problem involved. I find it an interesting speculation — intensely interesting. This evening, however, we are going to put this most interesting psychological problem to the test."

He paused a moment.

"And you, my dear Sinclair, are going to be the means of solving it."

Sinclair had not yet understood to what this introduction was leading, but already he felt a vague premonition of disaster.

"It may occur to you to wonder why I have chosen you personally as the subject of this experiment," Dr. Ainsworth continued, assuming more and more the manner of a lecturer. "I have had two reasons for that. In the first place, it was necessary for me to find a man of keenly sensitive imagination, as you will realize later. In the

second place, you are aware that I regard with the greatest distaste your intention of marrying my niece, Mildred. The idea of such a marriage is, in the highest degree, repugnant to me. However, considerations such as those must always come second to a man of science. I only mention them as affording an additional ground for my reasons in selecting you. The psychological experiment is, of course, the main thing."

By now Sinclair had serious doubts as to the sanity of this extraordinary old man.

"You have not yet explained why you have fastened me to this chair," he said. "At least, I suppose it is you that I have to thank for it."

Dr. Ainsworth nodded brightly.

"I am coming to that. I decided to use you, as I said, for my experiment. As you will remember, the problem is this: if a man is faced with the choice of alternatives, one of which leads to certain death and the other to some unknown fate which may range from freedom on the one hand, to a slow, revolting form of torture ending in a loathsome death on the other hand — if he is faced with choice, which alternative will he select? This is our problem, and this evening I look to you to decide that problem by being faced with just such a choice."

Taking no notice of the

young man's startled exclamation, he continued blandly.

"It was, of course, comparatively easy to get you here. It was a more difficult question to reconstruct the factors of the problem. I have given some considerable thought to this matter. You may not have noticed very carefully the chair in which you are sitting. I recommend it to your careful study."

HE PAUSED A moment to allow his next words their full significance.

"It is an electric chair such as is used in executions in America," the doctor went on. "On your head, as you have seen in the mirror, is a metal cap to which are attached two wires connecting with the storage batteries, which you cannot see but which are close behind you. Near your right hand" (the doctor indicated a small table set close to the chair, which Sinclair now noticed for the first time) "you will see a switch. Press that switch to the right and a current of electricity of enormous power (I need not weary you with the exact figures) will run through the metal cap on your head, through the metal chair on which you sit, and passing through your body, it will make a complete circuit, with the result that you will be instantaneously and painlessly electrocuted. That constitutes

one horn of the delimma. That is the way of certain and known death. You will recognize that that corresponds to the firing party in the original story. Do I make myself clear?"

Sinclair shivered. The doctor had made himself only too clear.

"We now come to the alternative," Ainsworth continued. "The uncertain factor."

He opened a drawer and took out a small syringe and held it up to the light. Sinclair could see that it was filled with a colorless liquid like water.

"You may have heard, my dear Sinclair, of some researches I have made into the causes of certain diseases. I have succeeded in isolating the germs of a number of the better known diseases and of some others less widely known. All round this room you can see test-tubes filled with various liquids. Each of these contains the bacilli of some disease or other. This, for instance" (he picked up one at random), "contains the germs of the disease generally known as meningitis."

He picked up the syringe once more and held it lightly in his right hand.

"What does this contain? That is the question, isn't it? You see, you are to have the choice between electrocuting yourself or injecting yourself with the liquid in this phial. You remember you gave it as your opinion that the men in

the story would have chosen the fate which, as a matter of fact, led to freedom. Well you may do the same. You may choose, if you wish, the contents of this phial. It may have the same result. It may perhaps contain merely water, in which case you will be none the worse for your little adventure. On the other hand it may contain the same as this tube." (He again picked up the tube in which were stored the germs of meningitis.) "In that case you will not have long to wait for your fate. In three or four days the symptoms should develop, and in about three weeks you will be dead. Not a very pleasant form of death, perhaps, but comparatively rapid. Then, of course, there is the cerebro-spinal variety of meningitis. It may be that. Also, I fear, not very pleasant. Or tetanus — what you call lockjaw. That would be rather disagreeable."

His voice had sunk to a sort of drone, and now he hardly glanced at his victim in the chair. All his attention seemed focused on the glass tubes, which he picked up one by one and named, dwelling on them, as if to handle them gave him pleasure.

"This is lupus," he went on. "It is an Eastern disease. I have a model of a sufferer from this disease."

He went across the room and came back with a glass case

containing a model in wax of a man's head. The nose had completely rotted away, the teeth were entirely outside the mouth and festooned round the protruding tongue like a necklace. It was difficult to imagine anything more revolting.

"Of course, the model was taken from a patient in the last stages. In your case, the disease would develop in a day or two, but you would not reach the stage I have shown you for many years.

"But I weary you with this recital. You will see for yourself that there are many more tubes from which I may have chosen."

He waved a hand to indicate the array of phials.

"I think I have said enough to convince you that if you choose to inject yourself with the contents of this hypodermic syringe you will go in fear of death or some form of disease that is a thousand times more horrible than death for a number of years at least. On the other hand, the contents may be perfectly harmless. See, I place it beside your left hand. You will find you have just sufficient freedom of movement to inject yourself with this, or if you prefer it, to push over the switch and electrocute yourself painlessly and immediately. The choice is yours."

He stopped and regarded his victim with interested eyes, trying to mark what emotions were

racing through the young man's mind.

"You will have half an hour in which to make your decision."

WITH A GREAT effort Sinclair threw off the horror that was seizing hold of him, and when he spoke he had succeeded in infusing some degree of calmness into his manner.

"But this is perfectly ridiculous," he protested. "I don't know whether you consider it a practical joke or not. If so, it seems to me to be in extraordinarily bad taste. In any case, I shall certainly refuse to make either one choice or the other."

The doctor looked down at him thoughtfully.

"I had anticipated that," he remarked. "For a time I was at some loss to devise a means which would force you to a choice. I think you will admit I have succeeded."

The doctor walked across to the corner of the room, and came back dragging with him a large metal cylinder, which he placed just in front of the other man.

"I have a supply of gas here," he continued. "You will notice this wire."

He indicated a length of tubing.

"One end is attached at a tap-valve on the cylinder. The other end I shall attach to the clock in the corner of the room in

such a manner that when the clock strikes the hour, the tap will automatically be opened and the gases released."

The doctor had never raised his voice. All the time he had spoken in a quiet, calm manner that served only to lend an added horror to the proceedings.

Sinclair passed his tongue over his lips, which had become quite dry.

"How am I to know the whole thing is not a bluff?" he demanded.

"It is, of course, very important that you should be convinced on that point," the doctor admitted. "Otherwise the whole psychological value of the experiment would be lost. I think this little experiment will satisfy you."

He disappeared behind Sinclair's chair. When he returned he was carrying a small metal cage.

"Here, as you see, I have a rat in a cage. Please watch what I do."

After setting down the cage on a bench at some distance from Sinclair he came across to the chair. "I now detach the terminals from your skull cap and attach them to the bars of this cage, so. Next I fasten this piece of rubber tubing to the tap of the gas cylinder, so. Now I connect this wire from the gas cylinder to the striker of the clock. We will move back the hands to two minutes to 9 for

the purpose of this experiment . . . there. As we are dealing with only a very small animal, a whiff of gas will be sufficient, and I shall turn off the tap almost immediately. You will not require a mask, but is as well to be on the safe side."

He saturated a handkerchief with some liquid and tied it in front of Sinclair's mouth and nose. He then saturated a similar handkerchief for himself.

"This will protect us," he remarked. "Now when I give the word, I want you to press your switch over. You see, I have adjusted the current of that also, to our needs."

He made some adjustment of another switch.

"There is still one minute to go. Watch."

THE NEXT SIXTY seconds seemed an eternity to Sinclair, whose eyes wandered backwards and forwards between the clock and the doomed rat.

At last the clock began to strike and as it did so, Sinclair observed that the wire had jerked open the gas cylinder. Almost immediately the doctor reached out a hand and closed it again. But the gas had already served its purpose. The mouth of the rubber tube leading from the cylinder had been within a few inches of the cage. Suddenly the rat rolled over on the floor of its cage and commenced to struggle violently.

For a moment the doctor watched its convulsions, then "Switch on!" he commanded suddenly.

Mechanically Sinclair pressed over the switch by his right hand. A blue spark flashed at the bars of the cage. The rat gave a tiny shiver and its struggle ceased forever.

"You see, it is quite dead," the doctor remarked. "Switch off."

For a minute there was silence in the room. The doctor busied himself refastening the electric terminals to Sinclair's skull cap and rearranging the mechanism of the clock, which he again set at the correct time: half past 9. When he had quite satisfied himself with these proceedings, he turned back to his victim.

"That the electrocuting machine and the gas cylinder, at least, are no bluff, I'm sure you are convinced. The injecting syringe may be, of course."

Sinclair could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"But this is sheer murder!" he made a last protest. "Don't you realize that you will be hanged if I am found dead in this room?"

The doctor smiled.

"Your solicitude for my welfare is charming," he said. "But be sure that the small knowledge of science to which I may perhaps lay claim has not left me without efficient means of disposing of any trace of your

body. Always supposing, of course, that your tastes lead you toward the electric switch. I shall leave you now. You have half an hour in which to make your choice. At 10 o'clock the gas cylinder will come into action. I shall come back a few seconds earlier to disconnect that, if you have already chosen. If not, be under no delusion that I shall interfere. I give you my solemn word of honor that I shall not do so. I need hardly say that I await the result of your deliberations with the liveliest interest."

Ainsworth crossed toward the door. At the threshold he paused.

"Just one word more. This room has been sound-proofed. To shout would be the merest waste of breath on your part."

A moment later the door had closed behind him.

4

ALMOST INEVITABLY Sinclair employed the first few minutes of his half hour in shouting for help, only to discover that Ainsworth had spoken no more than the truth.

He soon desisted and attempted to focus his mind on his situation, but the horror of it was such that only with the greatest difficulty could he escape from the paralysis that had seized his brain. Sheer numbing terror gripped him. The experiment

with the rat had convinced him that it was indeed no bluff with which he was dealing. Meanwhile the hands of the clock inexorably traveled toward the moment when even deliberate choice would be denied him by an agency more terrible than either horn of his dilemma could be. Helplessly his eyes traveled from the switch, so conveniently close to his right hand, to the hypodermic syringe equally handy on the left.

Gradually he forced himself to realize that it must be one or the other.

He looked at the electric switch. Certain, instantaneous, painless, but — death.

The syringe looked harmless enough. Water perhaps. That would not do a fellow any harm — but then one couldn't be sure. One wouldn't even know afterwards, not for a year perhaps, not for two, three, four, or even longer. How could one go on, dreading from day to day the outbreak of some awful disease, like the man in the model. Who knew whether any treatment would be effective?

Still, to die suddenly with all the world bright and inviting, and love . . .

This brought another aspect of the problem to his mind.

Suppose he chose the syringe, and kept his life for the time at least: what was he to do with it? After all, what was death? Clean, swift (when one had

seen five years of war, death wasn't quite the staring horror it seemed to the man in the street). Pretty rotten, of course. One hated to be snuffed out like that, but there were worse things.

His mind went back by a freakish turn to the story of the captured spies who preferred the death they knew. He remembered his own disbelief.

"Damn it, the fellows were right!" he cried bitterly.

It was just three minutes to 10 when he shut his eyes tight, gave a little gasp, and pushed over the switch.

5

THE DOCTOR had returned from the dining room. He had no intention of joining his niece until he knew the result of his experiment. He lit himself another cigar, and sat down to wait and speculate.

He was interrupted in this reverie by his niece, who suddenly appeared at the door.

"However much longer are you going to be?" she demanded; then, coming into the room, she perceived that the doctor was alone. "Why! what have you done with Arthur?"

Dr. Ainsworth looked at his watch. It was a quarter to 10.

"We are having a little experiment, a very fascinating experiment," the doctor continued. "Listen, dear, and tell me what

you think will be the outcome. For myself, I am unable to make up my mind."

He thereupon went over the facts of the case to the girl, speaking as he would have spoken of any other scientific experiment of his. He did not even notice the horror in his hearer's face.

"Why! You're murdering him, uncle!" she cried, springing up.

The doctor looked at her agitation with surprise. Then he smiled a slow smile.

"My dear, it's quite harmless," he said. "There is no danger. When I came out of the room, I disconnected the current of the batteries. He can do himself no harm."

"But the other thing! He may be choosing that!"

Ainsworth laughed outright.

"Water, dear, water. I shall, of course, tell him afterwards, when he has made his choice. There only remains the gas, and that is disconnected also. You see, dear, it is quite bloodless."

The clock then pointed to five minutes to 10.

"Oh, hurry, uncle, hurry!" the girl panted. "It's torture! I think you must be mad. It's cruel — cruel!"

"On the contrary, dear, it is as fascinating an experiment as any I have undertaken. Doubtless he is making his decision now."

He had allowed the girl to drag him upstairs.

"I have always supposed that experiments with the human mind would be of all experiments the most fascinating, and I see now that I was right in supposing so," he remarked on the way up.

"By the way, if by any chance this young man of yours has chosen to face the uncertainty of the injection, and if, suspecting his blood to be tainted, he asks to be released from his engagement to you, before knowing the injection to be harmless,

I shall entirely withdraw my opposition to your marriage. A most fascinating problem."

He had reached the door of the laboratory and fumbled with the handle.

"Oh, hurry, uncle, hurry. He must have had such a terrible fright."

The old man chuckled, "I dare say he has."

He had.

When they reached him, he was quite dead.



Your letters of suggestions and requests have been pouring in, and less than two weeks after the first issue appeared on sale they had passed the point where it was possible for us to acknowledge them individually. Wherever it is possible for us to obtain a story you have asked for, we shall do it; and when such a story is published, we shall thank the reader publicly and send him (or her) a complimentary copy of the issue. This assumes, of course, that the story suggested was not one we already had in mind as a possibility.

The present issue had to be made up before our first issue was on sale, so we could not follow any of your suggestions, this time.

The Other One

by Jerry L. Keane

Prior to the advent of science fiction magazines, various phases of occultism were often encountered in stories of flights to other planets. John Carter, for example, did not get to Mars via rocket ship. Jerry L. Keane is well-known for articles on scientific and psychical subjects; in this story, the phenomena is based upon that which occultists maintain is (a) real (b) not in any way supernatural.

IN A FEW minutes I shall have to call the police, but I know that they will not believe me. It is better, perhaps, that I write it down now while the details are still clear in my mind. But they won't believe it anyhow, and the writing is not easy in view of the fact that the evidence, the body of my landlord, lies a few feet away, blocking the door.

His face is turned away from me, but I am aware of the bulging staring eyes, and the protruding blackened tongue, even though I cannot see them from where I am sitting in my bed.

I went to bed early tonight. The day had been long and difficult, and I needed the rest. The cat came into the bed with me, as usual, and we must have gone to sleep fairly quickly, for

it seemed as if nearly the entire night had past, and yet my clock tells me that it is only just past three in the morning.

I never did know what it was about the man that I did not like. He bought the house after I had been living there for over two years, and from the first day that I saw him, there arose within me a feeling of loathing such as I had never known before and hope never to experience again. The cat felt the same way about him, and each time that he saw the man, would arch his back and spit at him, and if Mr. G. approached, would lash out with his claws. Now this was strange, for Mr G. was fond of cats and had three of his own. Maybe mine picked up what was to occur tonight; I have no way to tell.

Until tonight, however, aside from an assortment of unpleasantries of a minor nature, I had no reason to feel the way that I did, and the things that happened that were unpleasant, were no more than minor irritations that occur when any landlord is unduly greedy.

Maybe it was his appearance that did it. He was a tall man, nearly six feet, and heavy, probably well over two hundred pounds. He could, perhaps, have been handsome in a superficial sort of way, when he was younger, but more than fifty years, and habits spoken of only in whispers that he was known

to have . . . indeed, flaunted in the public eye . . . made him obviously what people said he was. His eyes protruded slightly anyhow, and were of a pale, china blue. His lips were wet and red and slobbery as he spoke, and his skin was a flabby, pasty white. Indeed, what must have been a fine build, was running to flabbiness all over, and what repelled me the most were his fat, pudgy hands, with fingers like snarled stumps.

Yes, he was a thoroughly unpleasant character in appearance, and by reputation, and experience of him proved that the reputation was not only deserved, but earned

But this is beside the point. What actually happened; the reason that he is now lying dead inside the door of my apartment, is unbelievable. I can't believe it myself, although I know it happened. How can I expect the police to believe what I, knowing what happened, find unbelievable?

BUT TO GET ON with it. As I said, the cat and I went to bed early, and promptly went to sleep. It was probably a bare ten minutes ago that I was awakened by the sound of a key turning in the lock of the door of my one-room apartment. There is no inside hallway. I sat up in bed abruptly, wide awake at once, and was

about to reach for the light and ask who it was, when the cat jumped to his feet, arched his back, and began to spit. I knew then who was slowly opening the door.

I was so terrified with fear that I could neither call out, turn on the light, nor reach for the telephone at the head of my couch. I just sat there, sweating with fear.

Slowly the door opened and Mr. G.'s face leered in at me through the opening. He saw my fear, and his leer turned to a vicious grin of anticipation, and he licked his already wet lips as he came in and closed the door behind him. There was light enough from the streetlight outside for us to see each other clearly.

He took one step forward, reaching out his arms as he did so, his pudgy hands ready to grasp. That was when it happened.

First the cat went for him, and went for his throat; but even as he did so, the really queer, unbelievable thing happened.

I swear I did *not* move from the position I was in. I was too terrified to do so, even though I wanted desperately to hide and to run away. But then, as I said, the unbelievable happened. As I sat up in the bed clutching the bedclothes to me, I saw myself cross the room swiftly, pull the cat away and

with my own hands, reach up to the man's throat and throttle him.

I was sitting in the bed, I tell you, and yet, I watched myself cross the room and with my bare hands strangle a man more than twice my size.

I saw the look of horror on his face as the other me, the one who approached him, came near, and I saw the scream rise to his lips as he twisted and turned, trying to tear himself free from the hands of the woman, who was shutting off his life.

It was I and it wasn't I. I saw it from the bed where I sat, too petrified with fear to move, and I saw it as the hands of the other me sank deep into the flesh of his throat.

I saw it from the me that sat terrified in the bed, and I saw his eyes bulge out of their sockets and his face turn black as the fury of the other I, hands tightening relentlessly to shut off his breath, pressed the other I's face close to his.

The other I heard the last faint gurgle and felt the sudden relaxation of the man's body as his life, unable to support itself in the body longer, left, and he slumped to the floor.

The I in the bed was conscious half of one and half of the other, and then as the other I made sure that the corpse at

her feet was lifeless, that I returned instantaneously to my body which was still sitting as if frozen in the bed. The cat sniffed the corpse briefly, and with a final spit, jumped back into the bed with me. The other I had disappeared.

It was probably a minute or two before I recovered enough to put on the light. I realized then that I would have to call the police. Yet, I did not move from the bed, and the man's body lies fifteen feet away, as

he dropped just inside the door. He did not manage to get across the floor to me.

The lawyer, I know, will want me to plead "self-defense", and I think, under the circumstances, that such a plea would be reasonable.

The only witness was the cat.

But what really will puzzle the police is how a frail woman, weighing less than a hundred pounds, could strangle, with her bare hands, a man more than twice her size.



Jerryl L. Keane is a psychic and sensitive, whose father and paternal grandmother were both mediums. She says that she "didn't pay much attention until in England in 1955", but she has investigated intensely ever since. Her varied career on both sides of the Atlantic has included printing and magazine editing, and she is a design draftsman in electronics by trade. She is author of numerous articles and pamphlets on psychical research and the relationships between psychics and physics, etc. Her book, "The Unity Of Is-ness" is a study of the reality of psychic phenomena throughout history, and its meaning.

Miss Keane is a regular contributor to our sister publication, **Exploring The Unknown**, and the October issue contains her article, "Thirteen Witnesses", which is a list of suggested basic books on both scientific and psychic subjects, for those interested in finding out what it is all about.

The Charmer

by Archie Binns

Even at the time when this story opens, the tale of the young man who is lured away from his bride by a strange and seductive woman was over-familiar. One would think that nothing new could be done with the theme. But Mr. Binns proves that one can be wrong, fascinatingly wrong, in such assumptions. It all depends upon the strange woman, you see . . .

MY FIRST STAY in Asia was some time before the 1914-1918 war, and it was extended over seven years, with an occasional furlough. As a subaltern in a British regiment, I saw a good deal of India, and something of Malaysia and Afghanistan. The land was full of mysteries, and things which science would find difficult to explain, but at the time we were chiefly concerned with keeping fit and being very British in the face of the mysterious East. On the day of my departure I was priding myself

on being as sane and solid an Englishman as if I had never been outside the most respectable districts of London.

The last day of those seven years, I spent in Colombo, Ceylon. Shortly before that, I had become engaged to the sister of one of my fellow officers. That morning, as I waited for nine o'clock, when I was to meet Florence and her mother, the future seemed to be as clear and untroubled as crystal. We were to be married with the ceremonies at the Church of

England, and a few hours later would take the P. and O. steamer home to London. My future father-in-law, Mr. Ross-Worthington, had offered me a place in his Fleet Street publishing house, and we would live quietly in Chelsea while I made a name for myself.

Such were the thoughts that revolved pleasantly through my mind as I strolled about Victoria Place in the delicious cool of the early morning. Around me drifted soft voices of the East and the undulating cadence of naked feet. In the street, rickshaws flitted by, with little brown beggar boys running beside them, bowing and throwing perfumed white blossoms to the travelers. Before me lay the Gulf of Manar, with slender coconut palms rising from the very edge of the sand, great steamships anchored to buoys in the offing, and Arab dhows, with knife-like lateen sails, gliding swiftly before a breeze that scarcely fanned my cheek.

Suddenly I came to myself with a start. A rickshaw had stopped beside me, and someone had spoken — called me by name, I thought, though I was not certain. Looking up, I saw a graceful young woman dressed in Indian silk and veiled. For some reason I trembled.

"At your service," I found myself saying, while I removed

my *topee* with an unsteady hand.

The girl leaned toward me ever so slightly. "I am sorry to have disturbed you," she said, "but I am a stranger here and I wish to take passage on the *Sirdar*. Perhaps you could tell me where the ship is to be found." Her voice was like the echo of bells, clear and indefinable, haunting and lovely. It had a delicate accent that suggested every graceful language I had ever heard, yet fitted none of them.

Until that moment I had never heard of a ship called the *Sirdar*, but I felt that if it took all day to find out, it would not be too much trouble.

"If you will wait one moment, I will find out," I said.

"Truly, I shall wait," she answered in enchanting tones. "You are very kind."

On my way to the near-by customs dock I met a native boatman, barefooted, in faded blue dungarees. "Do you know a ship called the *Sirdar*?" I asked him.

"I know the ship well, Master," he answered, gesturing toward the sea. "She sails at ten-thirty. My boat has taken many gentlemen on board this day. Do not take any of the other boats," he added, following me. "They would cut your throat and throw you overboard."

On reaching the rickshaw again, I announced that the *Sir-*

dar was lying off the nearby shore.

The stranger leaned toward me gracefully, like a flower swaying on its stem. "You Britons are so helpful," she remarked in a cool, sweet voice. "When you do not know something, you find out. If you had been a Latin, you would have been too indolent to inquire, and too courteous to leave me without instructions, and I might have been sent in the wrong direction. A Hindu would have told me there was no such ship, and an Arab would have known everything about it, even to the fact that it had just been sunk by some distressing accident!" She laughed softly. "By asking directions one learns much from some people and much about others. Now, thanks to your being a Briton, I have only to find a boat to take me to the ship."

In spite of myself, I was immensely flattered. "As for that," I said, indicating the man who had followed me, "here is a boatman who claims to have taken many passengers out to the *Sirdar*. I shall be delighted to see you as far as his craft."

The girl bowed in gracious assent, spoke to the man in purest Singhalese, and indicated for the boatman to follow. Once, on our brief way to the water's edge, it occurred to me to wonder what Florence would think of my taking part in this little Eastern procession on our

wedding day. But in another moment the thought was gone.

"By the by," I remarked, "this boatman comes highly recommended — by himself. He has indicated that any other boatman would rob you and throw you into the Arabian Sea."

"I looked into his face before I bade him follow," she answered. "What he says about himself is true — about the others, he exaggerates for business reasons."

"Then you are not afraid?" I asked, somehow wishing that she were — a little.

"Afraid?" she repeated, as if unfamiliar with the word. "No, I have no reason to be afraid."

Something about the way it was said gave me a queer feeling. Did she bear a charmed life? A beautiful and apparently wealthy girl who traveled about Asia alone, would need something of the kind. By this time we had reached the dock, where the boatman's craft was lying — a sturdy four-oared boat with the native rowers sitting erect on the thwarts; a trimmer outfit than I had hoped to see. I went through the form of helping my companion out of her rickshaw, but the weight she put on my arm was no more than that of a feather. Her luggage, two dark chests inscribed with curious characters, was put in the cutter, and I prepared to take my leave.

The girl held out her hand.

After a moment's hesitation, she lifted her veil — and my eyes were dazzled by her blonde beauty. I had seen beautiful faces before, with pure, clear-cut features and rose-petal skin, but this one had a fresh, dewy loveliness that made me think of the dawn of creation. Then I became conscious of her large, steady eyes — with dark, unfathomable depths that seemed to hold every secret of the world — and a slight, baffling smile that called up a thousand questions while the eyes held me speechless.

AFTER THAT I WAS no more responsible than a sleep-walker. I found myself insisting that it would be unsafe for her to go out to the *Sirdar* unaccompanied, and she accepted my escort. She dropped the veil over her face again.

The rowers were bending to their work when I heard my name called, unmistakably this time. Turning my head, I saw Dick Worthington, Florence's cousin and my best-man-to-be, standing on the dock we had just left, looking after me inquiringly. I called out something about being back soon, and he sauntered away, whistling an air I did not catch. The spell descended upon me again, when the girl began to speak, and Florence and her cousin and mother and my appointment — all the affairs of

the world — seemed unimportant and far away. So intent was I on listening to the music of her speech that afterward I remembered only a fragment of her words.

"I have visited Ceylon before," she told me, "but that was long ago. I came overland from India, and here I took a dhow across the Arabian Sea and up the Red Sea. The dhow was worked across the desert isthmus by the Egyptians, through a water-filled trench, and we crossed the Mediterranean to the Island of Cyprus."

When I again raised my eyes from her veiled face, the *Sirdar* was looming close ahead — an ancient sidewheel steamer of no more than 2,500 tons, built of wood and barque-rigged, with a heavy tophamper. Just forward of the paddleboxes the thick smoke-stack rose straight up like a factory chimney, held in place by half a hundred guy-wires. There was something unmistakably familiar about the cut of the steamer; I had seen just such things in pictures — the crack transatlantic liners of half a century before. I supposed that all of them had gone to the ship-breaker's yard long ago; yet here was one, with her glory forgotten and her true name obliterated, laboring on through fabulous Eastern seas — the ghost of a bygone century on the opposite side of the Earth.

The boat slid alongside; there was a hurried slipping of oars and brown hands seized the platform of the passenger ladder. I assisted my companion to the platform, and remained standing in the boat uncertain. The curious chests were handed to Arab boys who swarmed down the ladder. The young lady tossed a coin to the boatman, who carried it to his forehead and lips as a sign of thanks, and as he did so I got the impression that it was an ancient gold piece, such as I had never seen before. While I was fighting with my desire to stay and the knowledge that I must go, the girl turned to me. This time she held out her hand without hesitation and raised her veil; and again my eyes were dazzled and I became powerless under her enchanting gaze.

"You have been thoughtful and generous," she said, while I thrilled at the touch of her hand. "I wish you all good fortune."

There was a moment of hesitation, and then my last thread of resistance snapped!

"If you don't mind," I ventured, "I should like to stop on board for an hour and talk to you." She bowed assent and spoke to the boatman in a dialect I did not understand.

"Boatman," I said, handing him a five-rupee note, "come

back for me in an hour — or just before the *Sirdar* sails."

"Yes, Master," he answered, "and do not take any other boat. They will cut your throat and throw you into the sea."

As we climbed to the deck, I was aware of several young men in white suits and *topees* clustering at the rail, and also of a sudden hush of expectation such as occurs when a queen passes in some procession. Strange, I thought, that well-to-do Europeans should travel on this outlandish and unseaworthy hulk!

Taking no notice of the others, the girl said to me: "If you will not be offended, I will see that my stateroom is in order. Before sailing, I hope we shall have an opportunity to talk again."

I stammered that it would be a pleasure, and she was gone. Next moment I was greeted by two fine, fresh-faced young Englishmen — brothers, I supposed, from their appearance.

"Who is she?" both demanded at once.

I must have looked blank and somewhat annoyed. "If you are speaking of the lady I escorted on board," I answered stiffly, "I know nothing about her except that she is a stranger in Colombo who asked to be directed to this ship. As she was unaccompanied; I thought it only proper to see her safely on board."

There was a change of ex-

pression, not only on the faces of the English lads, but on those of a prosperous Dutch planter and an American ship's officer, who had drawn nearer.

"Sorry to have been so inquisitive," one of the brothers said genially, "but we supposed you were some friend or relative. I am Jack Rhodes, and this is my brother, Frank. Both of us are overseers on the tea plantations."

"And I am George Hawkin," I explained, "late of the British Army in India."

All of us bowed.

"There is a curious likeness in our experiences," the elder brother continued presently. "Frank and I had leave to spend a week-end in Colombo. This morning, quite early, when we were strolling about, a rickshaw stopped beside us, and the loveliest voice in the world asked where she might find the *Sirdar* . . ."

"And she called us by name," Frank put in.

"You only imagined that," the other insisted.

I felt myself tremble — I had imagined the same thing!

"At any rate," Jack continued, "we dashed about like lunatics and found the information. The lady was very gracious, and when she was thanking us she raised her veil . . ." He turned on me with a haunted look in his eyes. "Have you seen her face?"

"Yes," I answered quietly, "I have seen."

"When she was gone, we stood there like dummies," he went on. "I had a mad inclination to take passage on the *Sirdar*, just to see that face again. Frank had the same madness — and here we are, about to sail for God knows where, with our jobs gone to pot, very likely."

"What will you gain by it?" I asked.

The younger brother looked at me seriously out of his clear, gray eyes. "We're taking equal chances," he told me. "There won't be any hard feelings, whichever loses."

"Where is she from, anyway?" the American seaman interrupted suddenly.

"Good God!" I cried. "Are you in this, too?"

He nodded. "I'm second officer of the *Mariposa* over there." He indicated a freighter moored half a mile to the north. "Or, rather, I was. This morning I went ashore for some papers. While I was walking around, waiting for them to be signed, a rickshaw stopped beside me, and — you know the rest. If the *Mariposa* sails without me, I can't help it. I must have been hypnotized — still am."

"What about your job?" Frank asked.

"What about yours?" came the response. "It doesn't seem to matter. Only I thought you might know something about

her nationality — this is my first trip to the East."

"She might be a Persian or Arab girl, educated in England," the Dutch planter suggested, launching abruptly into the conversation. "She spoke to me in Dutch, with a slight English accent, I thought."

The rest of us shook our heads as the mystery deepened.

"I have heard Italian voices like hers," someone offered — "not half so lovely, of course."

"Excuse my intruding," said a swarthy and handsome newcomer, "but that is not a good guess. When the young lady asked me to direct her, she spoke Italian that was as beautiful as music, but it had an unfamiliar accent — perhaps that of —some other Mediterranean country, I cannot say."

When it became evident that no one of us knew more than another, the group about the boarding-ladder gradually broke up and drifted away. For my part, I was glad the boatman would arrive soon to take me ashore. The whole affair was as baffling as it was embarrassing. Clearly, the mysterious girl possessed some uncanny power — to speak to men of every nationality in their own language, and make them follow her with a glance! What was her purpose?

BITS OF OUR conversation in the cutter drifted back

through my mind. She told me that on her last visit to Ceylon she had come overland from India. But Ceylon is an island! I recalled that a hydrographic surveyor once said to me that the island had formerly been joined to the mainland. But how long ago? A thousand years? Ten thousand? And she had spoken of the dhow being worked across the Ishtmus of Suez, by the Egyptians, through a trench filled with water. Was that her description of the Suez Canal, or did she refer to the primitive waterway that had existed in the time of the Pharaohs? Had she been making game of me?

Around me the Arab seamen were making preparations for sailing; the last hatch was closed, ropes were being coiled down and lashings tightened. A new doubt crossed my mind. What had the stranger said to the boatman in that unknown dialect? Had she told him not to come back, so I would be carried off to an unknown destination — on my wedding day?

I was furious with myself, with the girl, and the others. Colombo seemed dim and far away among its palms, and the sea between darkened with gusts of wind. All at once, the city went out behind a squall of rain, and I was obliged to take sheltered in the murky saloon, where the Rhodes brothers were

urging each other, in low tones, to go back.

Presently I realized that the sun was shining again; and as I went out onto the rain-freshened deck I smiled at my fears. The big P. and O. steamer, on which we were going home, had come in, resplendent with white awnings and polished brass, and was being moored to the buoys near us. Then I saw a familiar four-oared boat riding at the platform.

"I wait for you, Master!" the boatman called.

The last of my suspicions passed in a sigh of relief. Before another hour was up, I would be telling Florence about my adventure, and admitting how stupid I was to imagine that a strange young lady had been in a plot to kidnap me. As I started toward the head of the ladder with an apology in my heart, someone touched me lightly on he arm. The girl was standing beside me, and I turned to look into that face of unearthly beauty.

"You thought I had told your boatman not to come back?" she asked, with a shadow of reproach in her melodious voice and glorious eyes. "I only told him not to be late."

Her eyes held me like a spell, and I wondered had I taken opium.

"Forgive me," I said at last. "This is the day of my wedding,

and I must have been a bit upset."

She smiled — a slight, inscrutable smile. "I know. I wish you joy. The ship is about to sail — your boat is waiting, and so is your beloved." Her voice was as baffling as her eyes, and whether it was filled with tenderness or mockery, I could not say. But somehow, a veil seemed to have been drawn between the two of us and the world outside.

"Master, the ship is cast off from the buoys, and is ready to sail!" I heard the boatman's cry faintly, as if it were coming from a great distance.

"Are you not going?" the girl asked me gently.

"Why should I go?" I could hear my own voice, and it sounded strange to me. "I have no desire to leave. I only wish to be where you are."

"What of your affianced?" she continued.

I shrugged.

"What of your home in England?" The enigmatic smile came back to her lips again.

My shoulders answered for me.

"Master, the ship sails!" The voice of the boatman rose like a thin wail, to be drowned out by the thunder of great paddle-wheels. My hands shook as I weighted a five-rupee note with a silver coin, leaned over the massive bulwarks and dropped

the little packet into the man's upstretched palm.

"Gol" I shouted. "I am sailing!"

When I turned to the girl, she laughed softly, and a gleam of triumph stole from the depths of her eyes.

As Colombo faded from sight, a weight seemed to fall from my shoulders, and I began to take interest in the adventure into which I had plunged. Learning that the ship was bound for Dilam, at the head of the Persian gulf, with stops at way ports, I paid my passage to the farthest point and was assigned a stateroom. The Arab purser showed no surprise at my having taken passage without knowing the ship's destination, and the inconvenience of having come away without a kit was minimized by the assistance of my fellow passengers.

THE REST OF the day I saw little of the mysterious girl, though I heard no other topic discussed. Jack Rhodes repeated a conversation he had had with her, from which I learned nothing more than that her name — or perhaps her title — was Miriam of Irak. That evening, as I was standing alone on the after deck, the Italian passenger, Signor Venzini, stopped at the rail beside me. The old *Sirdar* was ploughing with slow thunder through the warm, moonlit

sea, and from the deck below came the voice of an Arab boy, singing of the desert.

"I have been talking with Miriam of Irak," Venzini informed me during a pause in the song.

"You are most fortunate," I replied.

"Most fortunate," he agreed, lighting a cigar. "We talked for a whole hour. My heart is still overflowing with ecstasy." After a moment, he continued. "We talked of Leonardo da Vinci. Ah, what the greatest scholars of art would not give to have heard that conversation!" His eyes and the coal of the cigar glowed in the moonlight. "She spoke of the great Leonardo as if she had known him personally. She told me many things which no book records, yet I have reason to believe that they are true."

"Have you found any clue as to who she is?"

"That is a mystery. Yet, I have feelings — things that I guess at, but cannot explain . . . Do you know the works of da Vinci?"

"Some of them," I said.

"La Gionconda — the Mona Lisa?"

"I know it well," I told him. "That picture has always haunted me."

"Do you not see a likeness between Miriam and the Mona Lisa?"

Half-closing my eyes, I called

up memories of the painting until it floated before me. "They are much alike," I said. "The eyes and the smile are very much alike. But Miriam is blonde and slenderer."

Venzini ignored my last remark. "They are the same," he said quietly. "Think of her more-than-mortal knowledge of Leonardo, and the face and smile that have puzzled the ages. What if it was Miriam whom da Vinci painted?"

"Impossible! The woman who sat for that picture has been dead four hundred years."

The man looked at me. "Do you know who sat for it?"

"No — of course not."

"Then how do you know she is dead?"

That night I slept fitfully, and went on deck at the break of dawn. Miriam was standing alone near the bow of the ship, her face unveiled. I went up to her very quickly.

"You are up early this morning," I remarked.

"It is my custom. I never tire of watching the sun rise."

"I hope you slept well," I ventured, thinking of my own sleeplessness.

"I did not sleep at all," she answered calmly.

It seemed unbelievable; her face had the freshness of a child who has just awakened from beautiful dreams. "I am sorry," I said.

A smile came into her eyes,

or perhaps it was the light of sunrise. "Do not be sorry. Sometimes I stay awake for a long time, and sometimes I sleep for a long time."

"What do you consider long?"

"Oh . . . ages," she answered, looking at me solemnly. "What do you consider a long time?"

"Fifty years would be a long time to me," I told her.

Her smooth brow drew itself into a playful frown. "Are you hinting that I look fifty years old?"

"Good heavens — no!"

"How old do you think I am?" she asked with a ravishing smile.

"Not more than twenty," I guessed.

"You should have made it less," she replied serenely. "Women age rapidly in the tropics."

I was silent.

"Truly," she added after a minute, "it was not a bad guess. I am both older and younger than that." Before I had time to ask for an explanation, she spoke again. "The sun has risen and I am going back to the reading that kept me from sleep last night."

"It must be very absorbing," I suggested. "Is it a novel?"

"No, it happen to be a description of the fall of Kish, written in Babylonian," she said.

With that, she left me, more bewildered than ever, and angry with myself for not having asked any of the important questions that had been in my mind.

IN THE DAYS that followed, the old *Sirdar* trundled slowly toward the Persian Gulf, while the merciless heat increased. Under the awnings it was like an oven, and every unsheltered bit of deck was a furnace in the blazing sunlight. The night was little better; but the ship retained the heat of the day; long after sundown the iron work was too hot to touch, and the decks were unpleasantly warm at dawn. Tempers grew shorter; those of us who had started as friendly rivals wrangled repeatedly and ended by ignoring each other. Only Miriam of Irak seemed untroubled; she remained cool and serene and lovely, alike undisturbed by the grueling heat and the taut nerves about her. Could anything trouble her, I wondered?

The fifth evening the Rhodes brothers quarreled violently at dinner. As nearly as I could judge, Miriam had agreed to meet them both at the same hour — or else there had been a misunderstanding. Five days of rivalry and pitiless heat had wrought an unbelievable change in the two. I had seen them first as fresh-faced English lads, care-free and brotherly. Now their faces were white and drawn, and they glared at each other like mortal enemies. I got up from my unfinished dinner and left them, still bickering.

Perhaps two hours later, I was walking restlessly upon the

deck. There was a crescent moon, and light also came from the glow of phosphorus on the water. Miriam and the older brother were standing near the rail. I passed them without speaking and made my way a few feet down the deck, when something made me glance back. In the uncanny light I saw a stooping man, moving stealthily toward them.

The intentions of the intruder were unmistakable, and I bounded across the intervening space and caught him by the arms. With a thwarted cry he drew himself erect, and a knife rattled to the deck. To my horror, I realized that I was holding Frank Rhodes, though the look on his face made him almost unrecognizable.

"Are you mad?" I demanded, after drawing him out of hearing of the others. "Do you want to kill your own bother?"

The savage look died in his eyes, and suddenly he seemed very young and lost, like a punished schoolboy. "Miriam —" he murmured brokenly, "she made me forget everything — my own brother!"

He trembled as I led him to his stateroom, where I left him, crumpled up and sobbing on his berth. Returning to the deck, I put my hand firmly on Jack's arm. "Better go and look after your brother," I told him. "He's in bad shape — a touch of sun, I think."

After a moment of hesitation he turned and left us.

"Miriam," I said when he was gone, "do you know what just happened?"

She looked at me serenely. "What happened?"

"Frank Rhodes tried to kill his brother," I told her harshly, "and you know the cause."

Her face remained unclouded and serene, unchanged except for a slight, enigmatic smile.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" I demanded.

Slowly she shook her head. "Nothing," she answered softly.

"Have you no heart, no pity?" I burst out. "You planned all this. You know you possess some unholy power! You knew that everyone you asked for directions you did not need, would follow you. You knew you were ruining careers, breaking up homes, and turning brother against brother. You knew I was being lured away a few hours before I was to be married. Haven't you any pity for your victims, who never did you harm?"

Miriam of Irak bowed her head, until her lovely face rested against my arm that lay on the massive bulwarks, and her breath felt cooler than the outside air.

"Miriam," I whispered, all the anger going from me, "don't tell me I have thrown the world away for nothing? You made me your slave. Can't you show

me a little love — or even pity?"

For several minutes her face remained buried in my arm, and once I thought she was crying. But when she drew herself up and looked at me, she was as composed and untroubled as before.

"Do you ever wish for things?" she asked unexpectedly.

"Many things," I told her. "But since the first day I saw you, I have had only one wish — that you might love me."

"I, too, have only one wish," she answered softly.

"And what is that?" I demanded.

"That I could have some feeling — that I might care — that I might love someone, or be sorry."

"Do you find it so hard?" I asked incredulously.

"I find it impossible," she said simply. "Good night."

When she was gone, I stood for a long time, thinking. It was clear Miriam had told the truth: she had no heart, no feeling; she could care, or be sorry. She was something more than a mortal woman — and something less. But why?

THE NEXT DAY we encountered a hot, suffocating breeze from the desert. By afternoon the sea got up, so that all port-holes had to be closed. The saloon was like an oven, and we did not even attempt to go in for dinner. All this time I saw

nothing of Miriam. The sun set among fiery clouds, and we lolled under the awnings, gasping for air.

My eyes were shut to keep out the awful splendor of that sunset, when I heard a stir and murmur around me. Opening my eyes, I saw Miriam of Irak walking alone on deck, wrapped in a red cloak. Her face was lovelier and more enchanting than ever, but it had a look which I had not seen before, and cannot describe, except to say that it seemed to have a profound meaning, as if she were about to reveal all the secrets of life and destiny and death. In passing, she smiled at each of us, a smile so secret and remote that no one attempted to speak in answer, or to follow her. Even when she was within a few feet of me, I had the feeling that I was witnessing something unreal, in a dream.

Twice more she passed, making a complete circuit of the deck each time, and we did not see her again.

"What does it mean?" Jack Rhodes demanded, as if he had watched the working of a spell.

"Have you never seen a woman walk round the deck of a ship before?" I said, trying to hide the uncanny feeling which the performance had given me.

"Never like that," he admitted. "And I think I never shall again."

"But why did she wear a red

cloak?" Frank asked unsteadily, with a touch of last night's madness still in his eyes. "It seems to have a kind of meaning — that color in this awful heat."

Sleep was all but impossible that night, though I felt I must sleep or go mad. The heat appeared to increase as the night advanced. I remember hearing most of the bells struck up to midnight. I dozed and heard the bell again in my sleep, ringing incessantly. Suddenly I was awake, the loud, brazen clamor filling my ears, and mingled with it was the sound of frantic knocking on doors.

While I was struggling into a few clothes, the thunder of the paddle-wheels ceased. When I stepped on deck, flames were spouting from the forward hatch. The *Sirdar*, laden with an inflammable cargo of oil, was blazing like a torch. Either through carelessness or mishap, the burning foredeck was still turned into the wind, so that the smoke was suffocating everywhere and a constant storm of sparks beat over the whole ship. Boats were being manned and filled, and it was high time.

Was Miriam in one of those boats? I did not see her there, nor in the bewildered crowd on deck. Having noted the location of her stateroom, I plunged forward, buffeted by the heat, only to find a locked door. With frantic energy I burst the lock with my shoulder and all but

fell into the room. Miriam was not there; to all appearances the room had not been occupied during the voyage. I was cursing myself for having broken into the wrong stateroom, when I stumbled over one of the ancient chests I had seen brought on board. By its sound, it was empty. I was about to examine the other, out of mad curiosity, when a swirl of sparks hissed into the room, and I ran aft, blistered and choking. Smoke pillowed on all sides of me.

In the rising, flickering light the Arab captain was standing beside a boat that was about to be lowered, wringing his hands and lamenting that his European passengers were burning themselves to death when there was every opportunity to escape.

"Has Miriam been saved?" I demanded.

"In the first boat," he informed me hastily.

Something in his tone made me doubt his word; but as I stood there, hesitating, I was seized by several Arab seamen and hauled unceremoniously into the boat, which was lowered directly. Later I wondered how many such unwilling rescues had been made.

All night we watched the fiery spectacle of the *Sirdar*, keeping at a good distance to avoid the burning oil that spread upon the water. She sank a little before dawn,

crumpling and going down in an awful hiss of steam.

In the first light of day the surviving boats drew close together, with friends calling anxiously to one another. I did not see either the Italian or the Rhodes brothers. The name of Miriam of Irak was called from every boat, and there was no answer — somehow I had expected it.

We were picked up by the *Clan McKenzie* the same morning and taken back to Colombo. Again I loitered about Victoria Place, where Miriam's rickshaw had stopped beside me on that fatal morning ten days before. Was it really only ten days? It seemed more like ten crowded years since the time when I stood there, so proud and sure of myself — scornful of the snares of the East — the future clear and untroubled.

At the hotel I found a brief note from Florence, saying that Dick Worthington had seen me eloping with a strange woman; she trusted I had chosen wisely and wished me joy, only hinting at the humiliation I had brought upon her.

I SPENT THE next thirty years in hell, gathering a little wisdom, but neither fortune nor position. I had seen England only twice in that time, and then as supercargo of a disreputable freight steamer. The rest of the years I passed on the

coast and continent of Asia — waiting, looking half-expectantly — for what?

I had ample time to consider my ruinous adventure and the beautiful girl of Irak. At first I was obliged to believe that Miriam had been lost with the burning *Sirdar*; every boat had been accounted for, and she was in none of them. Indeed, it developed that no one had seen her since she walked on deck the last evening. And yet, as the years went by, I had an increasing conviction that she escaped. Often in dreams I saw her face with its immortal loveliness and baffling smile, and each time it seemed less possible that such a one could have met destruction. Rather she was a fixed star; and I, a spark flying into the troubled night. I felt certain that she had known of the fire first — even before it happened. What else could explain her appearing before us the last time wearing a red cloak — the symbol of fire that was so soon to overtake her victims?

Was she invoking the demon of fire when she walked three times around the deck, cloaked in the color of flame, smiling to each one in farewell, speaking to none? How could I help but believe that she possessed some supernatural power, stronger than any force of destruction? But the reason for what she had done remained as

obscure and remote as her inscrutable smile.

Then, not long before the second great war, something happened to make the events I have described live again as if they had occurred only yesterday. I was passing along Raffles Place in Singapore, near the Museum. Ahead of me a rickshaw stopped beside a handsome English officer who was loitering at the edge of the sidewalk. A graceful young woman, dressed in Mosul silk and veiled, leaned from the rickshaw and spoke. The officer removed his *topee* as if he were in the presence of a queen. I felt hot and cold by turns, and my heart beat quickly.

Drawing nearer the two, I overheard the young officer say: "I never heard of that ship, my lady, but I can find out in a moment."

"You are very kind and helpful," she answered.

There was no mistaking the caressing tones that had enticed me to ruin and the shadow of death thirty years before. I stopped in my tracks, unable and unwilling to move. The officer unfolded a copy of the *Straits Times* and rustled through it, stopping with his fingers on a small item.

"You will find the *Star of India* near the foot of Robinson's Road," he said pleasantly. "She sails for Hong Kong at

noon. It is a little after ten now."

"I am grateful for such kindness from a stranger," the girl answered, reaching up a slender, graceful hand.

She raised her veil with a quick little gesture, and my eyes were dazzled. Thirty years had made no change in that face; it had the same dewy loveliness that called up the dawn of creation. Perhaps because I had aged, she appeared even younger than before — almost like a child, except for the profound, shadowy depths of her Babylonian eyes and a smile that seemed to hold all the secrets of existence.

The officer gasped in astonishment.

A great cry burst from me like a sob: "Miriam!"

She gave no hint that she had seen or heard me. Slowly the veil fell over that smiling, ageless face. She spoke to her coolie in flawless Cantonese and the rickshaw rolled away. I followed it with my eyes, then with my feet, heedless of everything else, bumping blindly into the English officer, who paid no attention to me. He appeared to be calculating rapidly, and by the look in his face, I knew the snare into which he had fallen.

"You must never see her again," I told him.

"Really," he answered, shaking me off, "I can't be bothered

with you. I expect to see a good deal of her. It happens that I, too, am sailing on the *Star of India*."

"But you said that you had never heard of the ship before!" I protested. "I never heard of it before, either, but I can tell you one thing about her. I know that the *Star of India* is a doomed ship, and that you will meet ruin or death."

"I haven't time to listen to you, old man," he answered hastily, climbing into a rickshaw that had drawn up at the curb. "Take me to the foot of Robinson's Road," I heard him say to the coolie as he was whisked away.

Then I, also, was drawn inexorably to the *Star of India*. I even tried to go aboard, but I had neither the money for passage, nor the prosperous bearing that would get me across the gangplank without being stopped.

When the battered, rusty steamer sailed, I was still on the dock. Miriam was standing at the ship's rail, talking with a young Frenchman. Perhaps a dozen others, all young, all well-dressed, were crowding around. It was a gay and lively scene — to one who did not know . . .

Sometimes Miriam looked in my direction, but never with a gleam of recognition. As the steamer moved from the dock, I kept my eyes fixed on that

haunting, glorious face. If she had given me one sign — so much as the flicker of an eyelid, — I think I would have walked blindly off the dock into the sea.

The *Star of India* never reached any port. Bits of wreckage were picked up in the South China Sea, where the ship was supposed to have foundered in a typhoon with everyone on board. But I know better. There was one survivor . . . at least one . . .

Who is Miriam? I have told my story to some of the most learned men of the East and I

have heard many opinions and the opinions all differ. But I have my own opinion.

There is a legend of a woman who did not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and therefore remains deathless and ageless forever, beautiful from the dawn of creation, infinite of all knowledge except that of good and evil, without love, without pity. But she has never forgotten that her husband discarded her, and she takes revenge on his descendants through the ages.

The name the wise men have given her is Lillith, Adam's first wife.



Many readers of imaginative, fantastic, weird, and horror fiction not only like to tell an editor how they felt about the stories in a given issue, but also like to know what the consensus was on the stories in that issue. Of course, this can never be more than a minority report, as only a rather small percentage of readers write in — but experience proves that this can often be a valuable tip to the editor about how the silent reader feels.

Your letters and comments indicate that the best-liked stories in our August issue were "The Man With A Thousand Legs", by Frank Belknap Long; "The Yellow Sign", by Robert W. Chambers; "The Unbeliever", by Robert Silverberg; "The Last Dawn", by Frank Lillie Pollock; and "Babylon: 70 M.", by Donald A. Wollheim.

Clarissa

by Robert A. W. Lowndes

A century or so ago, no one saw anything amiss with an editor's including his own fiction in the magazine he edited; on the contrary, this was expected of him, both by the publisher and the public. Then, somehow, publishers got the idea that the editor's name on the contents page (outside of a credit line, and often not so much as that) was some sort of deadly sin; and he was permitted to participate only under pseudonyms, often as not without the publisher's knowledge. Happily, this unnatural situation is passing from the scene. In the last decade or so, Anthony Boucher, Avram Davidson, H. L. Gold, Frederik Pohl, and Donald A. Wollheim are just a few editors in the field of imaginative fiction who have not hesitated to take the same risks that all authors take when their stories appear in print.

We say no more, leaving comparisons up to you.

WE CALLED ourselves The Gourmets, and there were seven of us until Clarissa made us eight. It was Paul Le Marc who introduced her to us as a special guest at one of our feasts; where he found her, I shall never know in this life. It was Paul's turn that night, and his right to have one outside guest if he chose.

The rules of our society were simple and to the point: once a month we would assemble for a feast, and all the details were assigned by rotation. The time, the place, the menu — everything was at the dictates of that month's master. Paul Le Marc always chose his own estate as the place, although there was no telling in advance what part

A shorter version of this story, "Gourmet", is copyright 1946 by James Blish, for *Renescence* magazine. Reprinted by permission of copyright owner.

of it would be the banquet hall this time; Arthur Vernet alternated between his apartment and various exclusive dining clubs. I was confined to the latter, as I have no culinary skill of my own, although I have made suggestions at times which chefs have admired.

We all loved Clarissa, but she chose Paul — and none of us could imagine why. The two became one, though so far as the flesh is concerned, the proportions were something like three to one — Paul Le Marc is a fantastic figure. Thereafter they collaborated, when either's turn came, although one was in charge.

From time to time, one or more of us might have to miss a feast, and I was forced to apply for indefinite leave of absence when my business took me out of the country for some time. This was about a year after Paul and Clarissa were married, and we hadn't entirely recovered from our astonishment that it had happened, or that it had lasted so long. When I returned, Vernet told me that Clarissa was gone, and that Paul would serve the upcoming feast alone. The break had taken place between the present and the previous feast; no one knew any details.

And no one asked. We gathered in the stone summer house, by candlelight, and tried to pretend that it was all as it had

been before Clarissa first made her entrance. I think I was closer to Le Marc than any of the others of the original group, and he asked me to stay and tell him about Peruvian dishes — it was understood that we'd investigate possibilities wherever we went — but we both knew that there was more he wanted to talk about. Everyone else ignored the subtle differences, as well as the overt ones. In former times, Le Marc would have had all the dishes removed before the cigars were passed around.

We sat there alone in the summer night, in the wavering candlelight which made him a grotesque figure, the embodiment of the sensual Buddha. Look at a photograph of it some time and remember the original Siddarthic teachings; you'll see, then, the dichotomy we all saw in Paul. I thought of this as I listened to his voice rebounding along the walls.

"It isn't hard to understand why the Church made gluttony one of the deadly sins. Look at me, Kent. What am I, more than a gigantic stomach, an insatiable appetite?" He refilled his wine glass and emptied it. "When one's organs become so encased in fat as mine, what place can there be for a soul?"

I looked at him and thought again of the distorted Buddha, feeling a certain satisfaction in recalling how men make other

men gods, then how these gods gradually become ever more human as their worship extends. "Worrying about your external soul again?" I asked Le Marc.

"You misapprehend me — but it is a point. What meaning can life have for a man who can do nothing more than digest? I think they were right: we were meant for something more than this. Look at me closely, Kent. Can't you see the caricature of humanity I've become? Is there anything like me in the world outside?"

WE HAD ALL seen it for years; I thought of some of those mediaeval drawings, showing nobles with enormous paunches that had to be supported in little carts when they tried to walk. "Yes," I replied; "there is. There are appetites that are more ravenous than yours, and their owners remain as lean as the famished swine in Pharaoh's dream. Your glands function in such a way that your gluttony shows — but your case is harmless by comparison."

The wine was good, though I wondered if Paul was tasting it now. I shrugged. "Perhaps you are right," I continued, "but what of it? It may mean a few years trimmed off what would be your life expectancy otherwise. Does that really matter, Le Marc?" My eyes wandered over to the spot where Clarissa would have been had she been

with us tonight. "Does it matter," I repeated, "when you've lived as you wanted to?"

He had been leaning forward; now he sank back into the depths of his chair, his huge head shaking to and fro. "I haven't."

I looked at the great covered silver platter which contained remnants of tonight's feast — the finest that Paul had yet provided. Lucullus might have arranged for better, I told him, but I doubted it.

"And there you have it, Paul," I said. "You have made your unique contribution, and nothing can take it from you. If you believe that death is the end, then an instant after the light goes out it will mean nothing to you what the world remembers, or if it remembers. I quoted from Pound's *Cantos*: 'What thou lovest well, shall not be reft from thee . . .'"

He closed his eyes. "No — not reft — but it will pass. Once I was like you, Kent. Not merely young — I'm not too old even now — but alive. My soul was still the soul of a slender, vigorous young man whose blood throbs, and whose sinews are not lost in fat. I want to dance with the dance of the seasons, participate in the Olympics, go hunting at night with a bow and arrow with someone also young and lithe and alive.

"But my gods are terrible gods. I made them with my own

hands, to be my servants, but that was a long time ago. The gods you make yourself do not stay small. You hold them in your hands and believe — and your belief makes them grow. They are no longer my servants."

I lit my cigar and wondered which of us I felt sorrier for. "Clarissa's gone," I said. "For your own peace of mind, you have to realize that. She came suddenly and she went suddenly. I don't think any of us will see her again. I think in some strange, psychic way she is part of us all." I frowned at a thought which wouldn't quite solidify. "I had the feeling when she chose you, that in some lesser but still real way she had chosen all of us — and if she ever left you, she would leave us all."

His head bobbed up and down. "Yes." He poured another glass of wine, and lingered over it, as he used to do. "The fault was mine, perhaps. Perhaps I should have tried to steer her to one of you — but I was afraid, Kent. I was afraid if I rejected her . . . You cannot imagine how I hungered for Clarissa."

"Why not?" I asked as his head sank forward. "All of us did. She saw you differently than other people do, Paul. . . . Perhaps she saw you as you are; a woman can, you know."

His eyes were fixed on a candle at the far end of the room, and his voice seemed to come from a farther distance. "Every night I would dream that I was young and lithe again, only to awaken and see myself as you see me. Yet, she loved me, as you know. . . . I think we both knew that she would go quickly some day.

"It is a terrible thing to know such hunger as mine, Kent — to live with it. I think she knew it, too. I could see the realization growing behind her eyes. . . . But who else can know, really know, how I loved her?" He made no further sound, but tears were bright on his cheeks.

"Paul," I said, "you may as well tell me the whole story. You know you want to. Did she say nothing at all? Did she just vanish completely? Didn't you try to find out where she had gone? Are you sure you have no idea?"

A sob welled up from the enormous figure in the great chair. He stretched out a swollen hand for the wine bottle, but his reach fell short and it overturned, reddening the white of the tablecloth.

That was when I took the cover off the barbaric silver platter which still held a few cold slices of delicate, tender white meat.

The Strange Ride Of Morrowbie Jukes

by Rudyard Kipling

The year 1887 was a notable one in English letters, so far as popular fiction of quality is concerned. It marked the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, in "A Study In Scarlet." It also marked the first collection of tales by a young man whose works had been appearing for some time in a relatively obscure Indian newspaper, of which he was sub-editor. "Plain Tales From The Hills" inaugurated Rudyard Kipling's international reputation as a superb teller of tales. The present story is from the collection entitled "Under The Deodars," and its power is in no way diminished by the fact that the twentieth century has managed to reach deeper levels of inhumanity.

Alive or dead — there is no other way. — *Native Proverb.*

THERE IS NO invention about this tale. Jukes by accident stumbled upon a village that is well known to exist, though he is the only Englishman who has been there. A somewhat similar institution used to flourish on the outskirts of Calcutta, and

there is a story that if you go into the heart of Bikanir, which is in the heart of the Great Indian Desert, you shall come across not a village but a town where the Dead who did not die but may live have established their headquarters. And, since it is

perfectly true that in the same Desert is a wonderful city where all the rich money-lenders retreat after they have made their fortunes (fortunes so vast that the owners cannot trust even the strong hand of the Government to protect them, but take refuge in the waterless sands), and drive sumptuous C-spring broughams, and buy beautiful girls and decorate their palaces with gold and ivory and Minton tiles and mother-o'-pearl, I do not see why Jukes' tale should not be true. He is a Civil Engineer, with a head for plans and distances and things of that kind, and he certainly would not take the trouble to invent imaginary traps. He could earn more by doing his legitimate work. He never varies the tale in the telling, and grows very hot and indignant when he thinks of the disrespectful treatment he received. He wrote this quite straightforwardly at first, but he has touched it up in places and introduced Moral Reflections: thus: —

IN THE BEGINNING it all arose from a slight attack of fever. My work necessitated my being in camp for some months between Pakpattan and Mubarakpur — a desolate sandy stretch of country as every one who has had the misfortune to go there may know. My coolies were neither more nor less exasperating than other gangs, and my

work demanded sufficient attention to keep me from moping, had I been inclined to do so unmanly a weakness.

On the 23rd December 1884, I felt a little feverish. There was a full moon at the time, and, in consequence, every dog near my tent was baying it. The brutes assembled in twos and threes and drove me frantic. A few days previously I had shot one loud-mouthed singer and suspended his carcass *in terrorem* about fifty yards from my tent-door, but his friends fell upon, fought for, and ultimately devoured the body: and, as it seemed to me, sang their hymns of thanksgiving afterwards with renewed energy.

The light-headedness which accompanies fever acts differently on different men. My irritation gave way, after a short time, to a fixed determination to slaughter one huge black and white beast who had been foremost in song and first in flight throughout the evening. Thanks to a shaking hand and a giddy head I had already missed him twice with both barrels of my shotgun, when it struck me that the best plan would be to ride him down in the open and finish him off with a hog-spear. This, of course, was merely the semi-delirious notion of a fever-patient; but I remember that it struck me at the time as being eminently practical and feasible.

I therefore ordered my groom

to saddle Pornic and bring him round quietly to the rear of my tent. When the pony was ready, I stood at his head prepared to mount and dash out as soon as the dog should again lift up his voice. Pornic, by the way, had not been out of his pickets for a couple of days; the night air was crisp and chilly; and I was armed with a specially long and sharp pair of persuaders with which I had been rousing a sluggish cob that afternoon. You will easily believe, then, that when he was let go he went quickly. In one moment, for the brute bolted as straight as a die, the tent was left far behind, and we were flying over the smooth sandy soil at racing speed. In another we had passed the wretched dog, and I had almost forgotten why it was that I had taken horse and hog-spear.

The delirium of fever and the excitement of rapid motion through the air must have taken away the remnant of my senses. I have a faint recollection of standing upright in my stirrups, and of brandishing my hog-spear at the great white Moon that looked down so calmly on my mad gallop; and of shouting challenges to the camelthorn bushes as they whizzed past. Once or twice, I believe, I swayed forward on Pornic's neck, and literally hung on by my spurs — as the marks next morning showed.

The wretched beast went for-

ward like a thing possessed, over what seemed to be a limitless expanse of moonlit sand. Next, I remember, the ground rose suddenly in front of us, and as we topped the ascent I saw the waters of the Sutlej shining like a silver bar below. Then Pornic blundered heavily on his nose, and we rolled together down some unseen slope.

I MUST HAVE lost consciousness, for when I recovered I was lying on my stomach in a heap of soft white sand, and the dawn was beginning to break dimly over the edge of the slope down which I had fallen. As the light grew stronger I saw I was at the bottom of a horseshoe-shaped crater of sand, opening on one side directly on to the shoals of the Sutlej. My fever had altogether left me, and, with the exception of a slight dizziness in the head, I felt no bad effects from the fall over night.

Pornic, who was standing a few yards away, was naturally a good deal exhausted, but had not hurt himself in the least. His saddle, a favorite polo one, was much knocked about, and had been twisted under his belly. It took me some time to put him to rights, and in the meantime I had ample opportunities of observing the spot into which I had so foolishly dropped.

At the risk of being considered tedious, I must describe it at length; inasmuch as an accurate

mental picture of its peculiarities will be of material assistance in enabling the reader to understand what follows.

Imagine then, as I have said before, a horseshoe-shaped crater of sand with steeply-graded sand walls about thirty-five feet high. (The slope, I fancy, must have been about 65°.) This crater enclosed a level piece of ground about fifty yards long by thirty at its broadest part, with a rude well in the center. Round the bottom of the crater, about three feet from the level of the ground proper, ran a series of eighty-three semicircular, ovoid, square, and multilateral holes, all about three feet at the mouth. Each hole on inspection showed that it was carefully shored internally with drift-wood and bamboos, and over the mouth a wooden drip-board projected, like the peak of a jockey's cap, for two feet. No sign of life was visible in these tunnels, but a most sickening stench pervaded the entire amphitheater — a stench fouler than any which my wanderings in Indian villages have introduced me to.

Having remounted Pornic, who was as anxious as I to get back to camp, I rode round the base of the horseshoe to find some place whence an exit would be practicable. The inhabitants, whoever they might be, had not thought fit to put in an appearance, so I was left to my own devices. My first at-

tempt to 'rush' Pornic up the steep sand-banks showed me that I had fallen into a trap exactly on the same model as that which the ant-lion sets for its prey. At each step the shifting sand poured down from above in tons, and rattled on the drip-boards of the holes like small shot. A couple of ineffectual charges sent us both rolling down to the bottom, half choked with the torrents of sand; and I was constrained to turn my attention to the river-bank.

Here everything seemed easy enough. The sand hills ran down to the river edge, it is true, but there were plenty of shoals and shallows across which I could gallop Pornic, and find my way back to *terra firma* by turning sharply to the right or the left. As I led Pornic over the sands I was startled by the faint pop of a rifle across the river; and at the same moment a bullet dropped with a sharp '*whit*' close to Pornic's head.

There was no mistaking the nature of the missile — a regulation Martini-Henry 'picket.' About five hundred yards away a country-boat was anchored in midstream; and a jet of smoke drifting away from its bows in the still morning air showed me whence the delicate attention had come. Was ever a respectable gentleman in such an *impasse*? The treacherous sand slope allowed no escape from a spot which I had visited most

involuntarily, and a promenade on the river frontage was the signal for a bombardment from some insane native in a boat. I'm afraid that I lost my temper very much indeed.

Another bullet reminded me that I had better save my breath to cool my porridge; and I retreated hastily up the sands and back to the horseshoe, where I saw that the noise of the rifle had drawn sixty-five human beings from the badger-holes which I had up till that point, supposed to be untenanted. I found myself in the midst of a crowd of spectators — about forty men, twenty women, and one child who could not have been more than five years old. They were all scantily clothed in that salmon colored cloth which one associates with Hindu mendicants, and, at first sight, gave me the impression of a band of loathsome *fakirs*. The filth and repulsiveness of the assembly were beyond all description, and I shuddered to think what their life in the badger-holes must be.

EVEN IN THESE days, when local self-government has destroyed the greater part of a native's respect for a Sahib, I have been accustomed to a certain amount of civility from my inferiors, and on approaching the crowd naturally expected that there would be some recognition of my presence. As a matter of

fact there was; but it was by no means what I had looked for.

The ragged crew actually laughed at me — such laughter I hope I may never hear again. They cackled, yelled, whistled, and howled as I walked into their midst; some of them literally throwing themselves down on the ground in convulsions of unholy mirth. In a moment I had let go Pornic's head, and, irritated beyond expression at the morning's adventure, commenced cuffing those nearest to me with all the force I could. The wretches dropped under my blows like nine-pins, and the laughter gave place to wails for mercy; while those yet untouched clasped me round the knees, imploring me in all sorts of uncouth tongues to spare them.

In the tumult, and just when I was feeling very much ashamed of myself for having thus easily given way to my temper, a thin, high voice murmured in English from behind my shoulder: "Sahib! Sahib! Do you not know me? Sahib, it is Gunga Dass, the telegraph-master."

I spun round quickly and faced the speaker.

Gunga Dass (I have, of course, no hesitation in mentioning the man's real name) I had known four years before as a Deccanee Brahmin lent by the Punjab Government to one of the Khalsia States. He was in charge of a branch telegraph-

office there, and when I had last met him was a jovial, full-stomached, portly Government servant with a marvellous capacity for making bad puns in English — a peculiarity which made me remember him long after I had forgotten his services to me in his official capacity. It is seldom that a Hindu makes English puns.

Now, however, the man was changed beyond all recognition. Caste-mark, stomach, slate-colored continuations, and unctuous speech were all gone. I looked at a withered skeleton, turbanless and almost naked, with long matted hair and deep-set cod-fish-eyes. But for a crescent-shaped scar on the left cheek — the result of an accident for which I was responsible — I should never have known him. But it was indubitably Gunga Dass, and — for this I was thankful — an English-speaking native who might at least tell me the meaning of all that I had gone through that day.

The crowd retreated to some distance as I turned towards the miserable figure, and ordered him to show me some method of escaping from the crater. He held a freshly-plucked crow in his hand, and in reply to my question climbed slowly on a platform of sand which ran in front of the holes, and commenced lighting a fire there in silence. Dried bents, sand-poppies, and driftwood burn quick-

ly; and I derived much consolation from the fact that he lit them with an ordinary sulphur match. When they were in a bright glow, and the crow was neatly spitted in front thereof, word of preamble: —

"There are only two kinds of men, Sar. The alive and the dead. When you are dead, you are 'dead,' but when you are alive, you live." (Here the crow demanded his attention for an instant as it twirled before the fire in danger of being burnt to a cinder.) "If you die at home and do not die when you come to the ghat to be burnt, you come here."

THE NATURE OF the reeking village was made plain now, and all that I had known or read of the grotesque and the horrible paled before the fact just communicated by the ex-Brahmin. Sixteen years ago, when I first landed in Bombay, I had been told by a wandering Armenian of the existence, somewhere in India, of a place to which such Hindus as had the misfortune to recover from trance or catalepsy were conveyed and kept, and I recollect laughing heartily at what I was then pleased to consider a traveler's tale. Sitting at the bottom of the sand-trap, the memory of Watson's Hotel, with its swinging punkahs, white-robed servants and the sallow-faced Armenian, rose up

in my mind as vividly as a photograph, and I burst into a loud fit of laughter. The contrast was too absurd!

Gunga Dass, as he bent over the unclean bird, watched me curiously. Hindus seldom laugh, and his surroundings were not such as to move him that way. He removed the crow solemnly from the wooden spit and as solemnly devoured it. Then he continued his story, which I give in his own words:

"In epidemics of the cholera you are carried to be burnt almost before you are dead. When you come to the riverside the cold air, perhaps, makes you alive, and then, if you are only little alive, mud is put on your nose and mouth and you die conclusively. If you are rather more alive, more mud is put — but if you are too lively, they let you go and take you away. I was too lively, and made protestation with anger against the indignities that they endeavored to press upon me. In those days I was Brahmin and proud man. Now I am dead man and eat" — here he eyed the well-gnawed breast bone with the first sign of emotion that I had seen in him since we met — "crows, and — other things. They took me from my sheets when they saw that I was too lively and gave me medicines for one week, and I survived successfully. Then they sent me by rail from my

place to Okara Station, with a man to take care of me. At Okara Station we met two other men, and they conducted we three on camels, in the night, from Okara Station to this place, and they propelled me from the top to the bottom, and the other two succeeded, and I have been here ever since two and a half years. Once I was Brahmin and proud man, and now I eat crows."

"There is no way of getting out?"

"None of what kind at all. When I first came I made experiments frequently and all the others also, but we have always succumbed to the sand which is precipitated upon our heads."

"But surely," I broke in at this point, "the river-front is open, and it is worth while dodging the bullets; while at night . . ."

I HAD ALREADY matured a rough plan of escape which a natural instinct of selfishness forbade me sharing with Gunga Dass. He, however, divined my unspoken thought almost as soon as it was formed; and, to my intense astonishment, gave vent to a long low chuckle of derision — the laughter, be it understood, of a superior or at least of an equal.

"You will not" — he had dropped the Sir after his first sentence — "make any escape

that way. But you can try. I have tried. Only once."

The sensation of nameless terror which I had in vain attempted to strive against, overmastered me completely. My long fast — it was now close upon ten o'clock, and I had eaten nothing since tiffin on the previous day — combined with the violent agitation of the ride had exhausted me, and I verily believe that, for a few minutes, I acted as one mad. I hurled myself against the sand-slope. I ran around the base of the crater, blaspheming and praying by turns. I crawled out among the sedges of the river-front, only to be driven back each time in an agony of nervous dread by the rifle-bullets which cut up the sand round me — for I dared not face the death of a mad dog among that hideous crowd — and so fell, spent and raving, at the curb of the well. No one had taken the slightest notice of an exhibition which makes me blush hotly even when I think of it now.

Two or three men trod on my panting body as they drew water, but they were evidently used to this sort of thing, and had no time to waste upon me. Gunga Dass, indeed, when he had banked the embers of his fire with sand, was at some pains to throw half a cupful of fetid water over my head, an attention for which I could

have fallen on my knees and thanked him, but he was laughing all the while in the same mirthless, wheezy key that greeted me on my first attempt to force the shoals. And so, in a half-fainting state, I lay till noon. Then, being only a man after all, I felt hungry, and said as much to Gunga Dass, whom I had begun to regard as my natural protector. Following the impulse of the outer world when dealing with natives, I put my hand into my pocket and drew out four annas. The absurdity of the gift struck me at once, and I was about to replace the money.

Gunga Dass, however, cried: "Give me the money, all you have, or I will get help, and we will kill you!"

A Briton's first impulse, I believe, is to guard the contents of his pockets; but a moment's thought showed me of the folly of differing with the one man who had it in his power to make me comfortable; and with whose help it was possible that I might eventually escape from the crater. I gave him all the money in my possession, Rs. 9-8-5 — nine rupees, eight annas, and five pie — for I always keep small change as *bakshish* when I am in camp. Gunga Dass clutched the coins, and hid them at once in his ragged loin-cloth, looking round to assure himself that no one had observed us.

"Now I will give you something to eat," said he.

WHAT PLEASURE my money could have given him I am unable to say; but inasmuch as it did please him I was not sorry that I had parted with it so readily, for I had no doubt that he would have had me killed if I had refused. One does not protest against the doings of a den of wild beasts; and my companions were lower than any beasts. While I ate what Gunga Dass had provided, a coarse *chapatti* and a cupful of the foul well-water, the people showed not the faintest sign of curiosity — that curiosity which is so rampant, as a rule, in an Indian village.

I could even fancy that they despised me. At all events they treated me with the most chilling indifference, and Gunga Dass was nearly as bad. I plied him with questions about the terrible village, and received extremely unsatisfactory answers. So far as I could gather, it had been in existence from time immemorial — whence I concluded that it was at least a century old — and during that time no one had ever been known to escape from it. (I had to control myself here with both hands, lest the blind terror should lay hold of me a second time and drive me raving round the crater.) Gunga Dass took a malicious

pleasure in emphasizing this point and in watching me wince. Nothing that I could do would induce him to tell me who the mysterious "They" were.

"It is so ordered," he would reply, "and I do not yet know any one who has disobeyed the orders."

"Only wait till my servant finds that I am missing," I retorted, "and I promise you that this place shall be cleared off the face of the earth, and I'll give you a lesson in civility, too, my friend."

"Your servants would be torn in pieces before they came near this place. Besides, you are dead, my dear friend. It is not your fault, of course, but nonetheless, you are dead and buried."

At irregular intervals supplies of food, I was told, were dropped down from the land side into the amphitheater, and the inhabitants fought for them like wild beasts. When a man felt his death coming on he retreated to his lair and died there. The body was sometimes dragged out of the hole and thrown on to the sand, or allowed to rot where it lay.

The phrase "thrown on to the sand" caught my attention and I asked Gunga Dass whether this sort of thing was not likely to breed a pestilence.

"That," said he, with another of his wheezy chuckles, "you

may see for yourself subsequently. You will have much time to make observations."

Whereat, to his great delight, I winced once more and hastily continued the conversation: "And how do you live here from day to day? What do you do? The question elicited exactly the same answer as before — coupled with the information that "this place is like your European heaven. There is neither marrying nor giving in marriage."

Gunga Dass had been educated at a Mission School, and, as he himself admitted, had he only changed his religion "like a wise man," might have avoided the living grave which was now his portion. But as long as I was with him I fancy he was happy.

Here was a Sahib, a representative of the dominant race, helpless as a child and completely at the mercy of his native neighbors. In a deliberate lazy way he set himself to torture me as a schoolboy would devote a rapturous half-hour to watching the agonies of an impaled beetle, or as a ferret in a blind burrow might glue himself comfortably to the neck of a rabbit. The burden of his conversation was that there was no escape "of no kind whatever," and that I should stay here till I died and was "thrown on to the sand." If it were possible to forejudge the conver-

sation of the Damned on the advent of a new soul in their abode, I should say that they would speak as Gunga Dass did to me throughout that long protest or answer; all my energies being devoted to a struggle against the inexplicable terror that threatened to overwhelm me again and again. I can compare the feeling to nothing except the struggles of a man against the overpowering nausea of the Channel passage — only my agony was of the spirit and infinitely more terrible.

AS THE DAY wore on, the inhabitants began to appear in full strength to catch the rays of the afternoon sun, which were now sloping in at the mouth of the crater. They assembled by little knots, and talked among themselves without even throwing a glance in my direction. About four o'clock, so far as I could judge, Gunga Dass rose and dived into his lair for a moment, emerging with a live crow in his hands. The wretched bird was in a most draggled and deplorable condition, but seemed to be in no way afraid of its master. Advancing cautiously to the river-front, Gunga Dass stepped from tussock to tussock until he had reached a smooth patch of sand directly in the line of the boat's fire. The occupants of the boat took no no-

tice. Here he stopped, and, with a couple of dexterous turns of the wrist, pegged the bird on its back with outstretched wings. As was only natural, the crow began to shriek at once and beat the air with its claws. In a few seconds the clamor had attracted the attention of a bevy of wild crows on a shoal a few hundred yards away, where they were discussing something that looked like a corpse. Half a dozen crows flew over at once to see what was going on, and also, as it proved, to attack the pinioned bird.

Gunga Dass, who had lain down on a tussock, motioned to me to be quiet, though I fancy this was a needless precaution. In a moment, and before I could see how it happened, a wild crow, who had grappled with the shrieking and helpless bird, was entangled in the latter's claws, swiftly disengaged by Gunga Dass and pegged down beside its companion in adversity. Curiosity, it seemed, overpowered the rest of the flock, and almost before Gunga Dass and I had time to withdraw to the tussock, two more captives were struggling in the upturned claws of the decoys. So the chase — if I can give it so dignified a name — continued until Gunga Dass had captured seven crows. Five of them he throttled at once, reserving two for further opera-

tions another day. I was a good deal impressed by this, to me, novel method of securing food, and complimented Gunga Dass on his skill.

"It is nothing to do," said he. "Tomorrow you must do it for me. You are stronger than I am."

This assumption of superiority upset me not a little, and I answered peremptorily: "Indeed, you old ruffian? What do you think I have given you money for?"

"Very well," was the unmoved reply. "Perhaps not tomorrow, nor the day after, nor subsequently. But in the end, and for many years, you will catch crows and eat crows, and you will thank your European God that you have crows to catch and eat."

I COULD HAVE cheerfully strangled him for this; but judged it best under the circumstances to smother my resentment. An hour later I was eating one of the crows; and, as Gunga Dass had said, thanking my God that I had a crow to eat. Never as long as I live shall I forget that evening meal. The whole population were squatting on the hard sand platform opposite their dens, huddled over tiny fires of refuse and dried rushes. Death, having once laid his hand upon these men and forborne to strike, seemed to stand aloof from

them now; for most of our company were old men, bent and worn and twisted with years, and women aged to all appearance as the Fates themselves. They sat together in knots and talked — God only knows what they found to discuss — in low equable tones, curiously in contrast to the strident babble with which natives are accustomed to make day hideous.

Now and then an access of that sudden fury which had possessed me in the morning would lay hold on a man or woman; and with yells and imprecations the sufferer would attack the steep slope until, baffled and bleeding, he fell back on the platform incapable of moving a limb. The others would never even raise their eyes when this happened, as men too well aware of the futility of their fellows' attempts and wearied with their useless repetition. I saw four such outbursts in the course of that evening.

Gunga Dass took an eminently business-like view of the situation, and while we were dining — I can afford to laugh at the recollection now, but it was painful enough at the time — propounded the terms of which he would consent to "do" for me. My nine rupees eight annas, he argued, at the rate of three annas a day, would provide me with food for fifty-one

days, or about seven weeks; that is to say, he would be willing to cater for me that length of time. At the end of it I was to look after myself. For a further consideration — *videlicet* my boots — he would be willing to allow me to occupy the den next to his own, and would supply me with as much dried grass for bedding as he could spare.

"Very well, Gunga Dass," I replied, "to the first terms I cheerfully agree, but, as there is nothing on earth to prevent my killing you as you sit here and taking everything that you have" (I thought of the two invaluable crows at the time), "I flatly refuse to give you my boots and shall take whichever den I please."

The stroke was a bold one, and I was glad when I saw it had succeeded. Gunga Dass changed his tone immediately, and disavowed all intention of asking for my boots. At the time, it did not strike me as at all strange that I, a Civil Engineer, a man of thirteen years' standing in the Service, and, I trust, an average Englishman, should thus calmly threaten murder and violence against the man who had, for a consideration it is true, taken me under his wing. I had left the world, it seemed, for centuries. I was as certain then as I am now of my own existence, that in the accursed settlement there

was no law save that of the strongest; that the living dead men had thrown behind them every canon of the world which had cast them out; and that I had to depend for my own life on my strength and vigilance alone. The crew of the ill-fated *Mignonette* are the only men who would understand my frame of mind. "At present," I argued to myself, "I am strong and a match for six of these wretches. It is imperatively necessary that I should for my own sake, keep both health and strength until the hour of my release comes — if it ever does."

Fortified with these resolutions, I ate and drank as much as I could, and made Gunga Dass understand that I intended to be his master, and that the least sign of insubordination on his part would be visited with the only punishment I had it in my power to inflict — sudden and violent death. Shortly after this, I went to bed. That is to say, Gunga Dass gave me a double armful of dried bents which I thrust down the mouth of the lair to the right of his, and followed myself, feet foremost; the hole running about nine feet into the sand with a slight downward inclination, and being neatly shored with timbers. From my den, which faced the river-front, I was able to watch the waters of the Sutlej flowing past under the light of a young moon and compose

myself to sleep as best I might.

THE HORRORS OF that night I shall never forget. My den was nearly as narrow as a coffin, and the sides had been worn smooth and greasy by the contact of innumerable naked bodies, added to which it smelt abominably. Sleep was altogether out of the question to one in my excited frame of mind. As the night wore on, it seemed that the entire amphitheater was filled with legions of unclean devils that, trooping up from the shoals below, mocked the unfortunates in their lairs.

Personally I am not of an imaginative temperament — very few Engineers are — but on that occasion I was as completely prostrated with nervous terror as any woman. After half an hour or so, however, I was able once more to calmly review my chances of escape. Any exit by the steep sand walls was, of course, impracticable. I had been thoroughly convinced of this some time before. It was possible, just possible, that I might, in the uncertain moonlight, safely run the gauntlet of the rifle shots. The place was so full of terror for me that I was prepared to undergo any risk in leaving it. Imagine my delight, then, when after creeping stealthily to the river-front I found that the infernal boat was not there. My freedom lay

before me in the next few steps!

By walking out to the first shallow pool that lay at the foot of the projecting left horn of the horseshoe, I could wade across, turn the flank of the crater, and make my way inland. Without a moment's hesitation I marched briskly past the tussocks where Gunga Dass had snared the crows, and out in the direction of the smooth white sand beyond. My first step from the tufts of dried showed me how utterly futile was any hope of escape; for, as I put my foot down, I felt an indescribable drawing, sucking motion of the sand below. Another moment and my leg was swallowed up nearly to the knee. In the moonlight the whole surface of the sand seemed to be shaken with devilish delight at my disappointment. I struggled clear, sweating with terror and exertion, back to the tussocks behind me and fell on my face.

My only means of escape from the semicircle was protected with a quicksand!

HOW LONG I lay I have not the faintest idea; but I was roused at the last by the chuckle of Gunga Dass at my ear. "I would advise you, Protector of the Poor" (the ruffian was speaking English) "to return to your house. It is unhealthy to lie down here. Moreover, when the boat returns, you will most

certainly be rifled at." He stood over me in the dim light of the dawn, chuckling and laughing to himself. Suppressing my first impulse to catch the man by the neck and throw him on to the quicksand, I rose sullenly and followed him to the platform below the burrows.

Suddenly, and futilely as I thought while I spoke, I asked: "Gunga Dass, what is the good of the boat if I can't get out *anyhow*?" I recollect that even in my deepest trouble I had been speculating vaguely on the waste of ammunition in guarding an already well protected foreshore.

Gunga Dass laughed again and made answer: "They have the boat only in daytime. It is for the reason that *there is a way*. I hope we shall have the pleasure of your company for much longer time. It is a pleasant spot when you have been here some years and eaten roast crow long enough."

I staggered, numb and helpless, towards the fetid burrow allotted to me, and fell asleep. An hour or so later I was awakened by a piercing scream — the shrill, high-pitched scream of a horse in pain. Those who have once heard that will never forget the sound. I found some little difficulty in scrambling out of the burrow. When I was in the open, I saw Pornic, my poor old Pornic, lying dead on the sandy

soil. How they had killed him I cannot guess. Gunga Dass explained that horse was better than crow, and "greatest good of greatest number is political maxim. We are now Republic, Mister Jukes, and you are entitled to a fair share of the beast. If you like, we will pass a vote of thanks. Shall I propose?"

Yes, we were a Republic in deed! A Republic of wild beasts penned at the bottom of a pit, to eat and fight and sleep till we died. I attempted no protest of any kind, but sat down and stared at the hideous sight in front of me. In less time almost than it takes me to write this, Pornic's body was divided, in some unclean way or other; the men and women had dragged the fragments on to the platform and were preparing their morning meal. Gunga Dass cooked mine. The almost irresistible impulse to fly at the sand walls until I was wearied laid hold of me afresh, and I had to struggle against it with all my might. Gunga Dass was offensively jocular till I told him that if he addressed another remark of any kind whatever to me I should strangle him where he sat. This silenced him till silence became insupportable, and I bade him say something.

"You will live here till you die like the other Fehringhi,"

he said coolly, watching me over the fragment of gristle that he was gnawing.

"What other Sahib, you swine? Speak at once, and don't stop to tell me a lie."

"He is over there," answered Gunga Dass, pointing to a burrow-mouth about four doors to the left of my own. "You can see for yourself. He died in the burrow as you will die, and I will die, and as all these men and women and the one child will also die."

"For pity's sake tell me all you know about him. Who was he? When did he come, and when did he die?"

This appeal was a weak step on my part. Gunga Dass only leered and replied: "I will not — unless you give me something first."

THEN I recollected where I was, struck the man between the eyes, partially stunning him. He stepped down from the platform at once, and, cringing and fawning and weeping and attempting to embrace my feet, led me round to the burrow which he had indicated.

"I know nothing whatever about the gentleman. Your God be my witness that I do not. He was as anxious to escape as you were, and he was shot from the boat, though we did all things to prevent him from attempting. He was shot here." Gunga Dass laid his hand on his lean

stomach and bowed to the earth.

"Well, and what then? Go on!"

"And then — and then, Your Honor, we carried him into his house and gave him water, and put wet cloths on the wound, and he laid down in his house and gave up the ghost."

"In how long? In how long?"

"About half an hour, after he received his wound. I call Vishn to witness," yelled the wretched man, "that I did everything for him. Everything which was possible, that I did!"

He threw himself down on ground and clasped my ankles. But I had my doubts about Gunga Dass's benevolence, and kicked him off as he lay protesting.

"I believe you robbed him of everything he had. But I can find out in a minute or two. How long was the Sahib here?"

"Nearly a year and a half. I think he must have gone mad. But hear me swear, Protector of the Poor! Won't Your Honor hear me swear that I never touched an article that belonged to him? What is Your Worship going to do?"

I had taken Gunga Dass by the waist and had hauled him on to the platform opposite the deserted burrow. As I did so I thought of my wretched fellow-prisoner's unspeakable misery among all these horrors for eighteen months, and the final

agony of dying like a rat in a hole, with a bullet wound in the stomach. Gunga Dass fancied I was going to kill him and howled pitifully. The rest of the population, in the plethora that follows a full flesh meal, watched us without stirring.

"Go inside, Gunga Dass," said I, "and fetch it out."

I was feeling sick and faint with horror now. Gunga Dass nearly rolled off the platform and howled aloud.

"But I am Brahmin, Sahib — a high-caste Brahmin. By your soul, by your father's soul, do not make me do this thing!"

"Brahmin or no Brahmin, by my soul and my father's soul, in you go!" I said, and, seizing him by the shoulders, I crammed his head into the mouth of the burrow, kicked the rest of him in, and, sitting down, covered my face with my hands.

At the end of a few minutes I heard a rustle and a creak; then Gunga Dass in a sobbing, choking whisper speaking to himself; then a soft thud — and I uncovered my eyes.

THE DRY sand had turned the corpse entrusted to its keeping into a yellow-brown mummy. I told Gunga Dass to stand off while I examined it. The body — clad in an olive-green hunting-suit much stained and worn, with leather pads on the shoulders — was that of a man

between thirty and forty, above middle height, with light, sandy hair, long moustache, and a rough unkempt beard. The left canine of the upper jaw was missing, and a portion of the lobe of the right ear was gone. On the second finger of the left hand was a ring — a shield-shaped blood-stone set in gold, with a monogram that might have been either "B. K." or "B. L." On the third finger of the right hand was a silver ring in the shape of a coiled cobra, much worn and tarnished. Gunga Dass deposited a handful of trifles he had picked out of the burrow at my feet, and, covering the face of the body with my handkerchief, I turned to examine these. I give the full list in the hope that it may lead to the identification of the unfortunate man: —

1. Bowl of a briarwood pipe, serrated at the edge; much worn and blackened; bound with string at the screw.

2. Two patent-lever keys; wards of both broken.

3. Tortoise-shell-handled penknife, silver or nickel, name—"B. K."

4. Envelope, postmark undecipherable, bearing a Victorian stamp, addressed to "Miss Mon—" (rest illegible) — "ham" — "nt."

5. Imitation crocodile-skin notebook with pencil. First forty-five pages blank; four and a half illegible; fifteen others

filled with private memoranda relating chiefly to three persons — a Mrs. L. Singleton, abbreviated several times to "Lot Single," "Mrs. S. May," and "Garmison," referred to in places as "Jerry" or "Jack."

6. Hande of small-sized hunting-knife. Blade snapped short. Buck's horn, diamond-cut, with swivel and ring on the butt; fragment of cotton cord attached.

It must not be supposed that I inventoried all these things on the spot as fully as I have here written them down. The notebook first attracted my attention, and I put it in my pocket with a view to studying it later on. The rest of the articles I conveyed to my burrow for safety's sake, and there, being a methodical man, I inventoried them. I then returned to the corpse and ordered Gunga Dass to help me to carry it out to the river-front. While we were engaged in this, the exploded shell of an old brown cartridge dropped out of one of the pockets and rolled at my feet. Gunga Dass had not seen it; and I fell to thinking that a man does not carry exploded cartridge-cases, especially "browns", which will not bear loading twice, about with him when shooting. In other words, that cartridge-case had been fired inside the crater. Consequently there must be a gun somewhere. I was on the verge

of asking Gunga Dass, but checked myself, knowing that he would lie. We laid the body down on the edge of the quicksand by the tussocks. It was my intention to push it out and let it be swallowed up — the only possible mode of burial that I could think of. I ordered Gunga Dass to go away.

Then I gingerly put the corpse out on the quicksand. In doing so, it was lying face downward, I tore the frail and rotten khaki shooting-coat open, disclosing a hideous cavity in the back. I have already told you that the dry sand had, as it were, mummified the body. A moment's glance showed that the gaping hole had been caused by a gunshot wound; the gun must have been fired with the muzzle almost touching the back. The shooting-coat, being intact, had been drawn over the body after death, which must have been instantaneous. The secret of the poor wretch's death was plain to me in a flash. Some one of the crater, presumably Gunga Dass, must have shot him with his own gun — the gun that fitted the brown cartridges. He had never attempted to escape in the face of the rifle-fire from the boat.

I PUSHED THE corpse out hastily, and saw it sink from sight literally in a few seconds. I shuddered as I watched. In a

dazed, half-conscious way I turned to peruse the notebook. A stained and discolored slip of paper had been inserted between the binding and the back, and dropped out as I opened the pages. This is what it contained: "*Four out from crow-clump; three left; nine out; two right; three back; two left; fourteen out; two left; seven out; one left; nine back; two right; six back; four right; seven back.*" The paper had been burnt and charred at the edges. What it meant I could not understand. I sat down on the dried bents turning it over and over between my fingers, until I was aware of Gunga Dass standing immediately behind me with glowing eyes and outstretched hands.

"Have you got it?" he panted. "Will you not let me look at it also? I swear that I will return it."

"Got what? Return what? I asked.

"That which you have in your hands. It will help us both." He stretched out his long, bird-like talons, trembling with eagerness.

"I could never find it," he continued. "He had secreted it about his person. Therefore I shot him, but nevertheless I was unable to obtain it."

Gunga Dass had quite forgotten his little fiction about the rifle-bullet. I heard him calmly. Morality is blunted by

consorting with the Dead who are alive.

"What on earth are you raving about? What is it you want me to give you?"

"The piece of paper in the notebook. It will help us both. Oh, you fool! You fool! Can you not see what it will do for us? We shall escape!"

His voice rose almost to a scream, and he danced with excitement before me. I own I was moved at the chance of getting away.

"Do you mean to say that this slip of paper will help us? What does it mean?"

"Read it aloud! Read it aloud! I beg and I pray to you to read it aloud."

I did so. Gunga Dass listened delightedly, and drew an irregular line in the sand with his fingers.

"See now! It was the length of his gun-barrels without the stock. I have those barrels. Four gun-barrels out from the place where I caught crows. Straight out — do you mind me? Then three left. Ah! Now well I remember how that man worked it out night after night. Then nine out, and so on. Out is always straight before you across the quicksand to the North. He told me so before I killed him."

"But if you know all this why didn't you get out before?"

"I did *not* know it. He told me that he was working it out a year and a half ago, and how

he was working it out night after night when the boat had gone away, and he could get out near the quicksand safely. Then he said that we would get away together. But I was afraid that he would leave me behind one night when he had worked it all out, and so I shot him. Besides, it is not advisable that the men who once get in here should escape. Only I, and I am a Brahmin."

The hope of escape had brought Gunga Dass's caste back to him. He stood up, walked about and gesticulated violently. Eventually I managed to make him talk soberly, and he told me how this Englishman had spent six months night after night in exploring, inch by inch, the passage across the quicksand; how he had declared it to be simplicity itself up to within about twenty yards of the river bank after turning the flank of the left horn of the horseshoe. This much he had evidently not completed when Gunga Dass shot him with his own gun.

In my frenzy of delight at the possibilities of escape, I recollect shaking hands wildly with Gunga Dass, after we had decided that we were to make an attempt to get away that very night. It was weary work waiting throughout the afternoon.

ABOUT TEN O'CLOCK, as far as I could judge, when the

Moon had just risen above the lip of the crater, Gunga Dass made a move for his burrow to bring out the gun-barrels whereby to measure our path. All the other wretched inhabitants had retired to their lairs long ago. The guardian boat drifted down-stream some hours before, and we were utterly alone by the crow-clump. Gunga Dass, while carrying the gun-barrels, let slip the piece of paper which was to be our guide. I stooped down hastily to recover it, and, as I did so, I was aware that the creature was aiming a violent blow at the back of my head with the gun-barrels. It was too late to turn round. I must have received the blow somewhere on the nape of my neck, for I fell senseless at the edge of the quicksand.

When I recovered consciousness, the Moon was going down, and I was sensible of intolerable pain in the back of my head. Gunga Dass had disappeared and my mouth was full of blood. I lay down again and prayed that I might die without more ado. Then the unreasoning fury which I have before mentioned laid hold upon me, and I staggered inland towards the walls of the crater. It seemed that some one was calling to me in a whisper — "Sahib! Sahib! Sahib!" exactly as my bearer used to

call me in the mornings. I fancied that I was delirious until a handful of sand fell at my feet. Then I looked up and saw a head peering down into the amphitheater — the head of Dunnoo, my dog-boy, who attended to my collies. As soon as he had attracted my attention, he held up his hand and showed a rope. I motioned, staggering to and fro the while, that he should throw it down. It was a couple of leather punkah-ropes knotted together, with a loop at one end. I slipped the loop over my head and under my arms; heard Dunnoo urge something forward; was conscious that I was being dragged face downward, up the steep sand-slope, and the next instant found myself choked and half-fainting on the sand hills overlooking the crater. Dunnoo, with his face ashy gray in the moonlight, implored me not to stay but to get back to my tent at once.

It seems that he had tracked Pornic's footprints fourteen miles across the sands to the crater; had returned and told my servants, who flatly refused to meddle with any one, white or black, once fallen into the hideous Village of the Dead; whereupon Dunnoo had taken one of my ponies and a couple of punkah ropes, returned to the crater, and hauled me out as I have described.

Coming Next Issue

"I came here some years ago, and bought this castle. I spent a large sum in making it suitable as a residence for the best kind of people. Of course, I had hoped that now and then I should have company; so I prepared a series of guest chambers. . . . I began to be known, just a little; people in Paris and Moscow and New York began to whisper about this castle, and finally a man called from Moscow. He was a nervous fellow, always putting things in his mouth.

"One day we were walking through the forest and we saw some red seeds on the ground, near the skeleton of a horse. They looked exactly like pomegranate seeds. This Russian nobleman put some in his mouth and that night he became unconscious. Of course I was worried, because I was sure that his friends would think that I had poisoned him. After some weeks of unconsciousness, he died. I went back to the forest and picked up all the seeds that were scattered around, and I brought them back and planted some, and they would not germinate. The more I worried, the worse I felt, and just when it seemed that I could not bear the suspense any longer, a man by the name of Southward, from an American town called Atlanta, came to see me. He had heard of me in Paris.

"I was young then, and I thoughtlessly told him about the Russian and asked him to help me unravel the mystery. He was a doctor, this American, and he asked me to let him see the seeds. I showed them to him, and he examined them. He cut one open and looked at it through a pocket microscope, and finally he said that it was just a hard seed, like a pomegranate, and that it was not the cause of the Russian's death, because it would never be dissolved in his stomach. . . .

"I cried and told him how relieved I was to know all this, and could he prove it to me — if he could, he would win my everlasting gratitude. What did he do but at once put a seed in his mouth and swallow it! And he became unconscious and died — just like the Russian. And that made two. . . ."

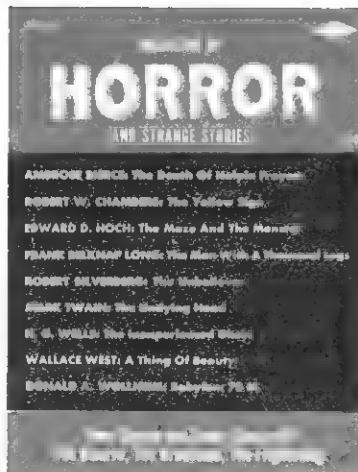
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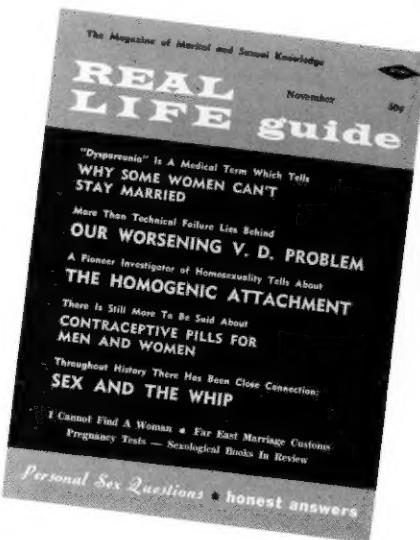
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